A MERCURY PUBLICATION

A Mercury Mystery

Dash in Dead

BY

Lawrence Treat

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

Salter

"... swift and perilous..."

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE

35¢

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D AS IN DEAD

BY

LAWRENCE TREAT

Author of:

The Big Shot

F as in Flight

B as in Banshee

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A MERCURY MYSTERY

MERCURY PUBLICATIONS • NEW YORK

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK, *Publisher*

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1: THE SACRED OAF

SHE WAS VERY YOUNG and she crossed the hotel lobby in a long, free stride. She was humming to herself and swinging her hat by the elastic band. It snapped suddenly and the hat went sailing along the floor and landed at Carl Wayward's feet.

She stopped short and looked around in embarrassment. Then she rushed for the hat, but she halted again when Carl picked it up. Her hands clamped behind her back and a panic of self-consciousness seized her. She stared and seemed unable to move. Suddenly she reached out and grabbed the hat. Her eyes mocked him and she giggled a thank-you as she turned and ran for the elevator.

Shortly after lunch, Carl saw her in action at the cigar counter. She was brandishing a package of Crackerjack and reading her personal riot act. "What I asked for was popcorn. People come all the way down to New Orleans and they sort of expect it. Especially for a boat ride. And all you have is this!"

The clerk said sharply, "We don't sell popcorn in a hotel lobby. You better try outside at one of them ten-cent movies."

That was when Carl burst out laughing. The girl turned in full fury and exclaimed, "I suppose you're on *his* side."

Carl considered the girl and the accusation. "No," he said, "I'm not. I think he ought to stock popcorn, for conventions, drunks and —" He hesitated while he sought a tactful phrase. "For princesses," he ended.

The cigar-and-candy man said, "They'd take away my concession, Mr. Wayward, if I sold junk like that. It ain't dignified."

Carl said, "See? He's perfectly reasonable."

She stuffed a piece of Crackerjack in her mouth. "That's a funny name to have. Wayward. I was just telling M'ma —" Then she blushed. "Oh, I don't mean that *she* is. What I really mean is, that when a family hasn't got a father, they're sort of different, aren't they? They're wayward." Her blue, liquid eyes studied Carl shyly and wondered whether she'd said too much. But the hat incident had established a bond between them. Carl had seen her at her worst, and he still liked her.

"Better discuss the father business with M'ma," said Carl gently. "That's up to her."

"Of course. But we never like the

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ones she does, and she can't marry without our consent."

"Who's we?"

"Sonny and me. He's waiting outside. We're taking the river trip and I'd better hurry."

She grabbed the Crackerjack and a couple of chocolate bars and forgot to pay. Carl dropped a quarter on the counter. "For the lady's popcorn," he said. "And my paper."

The third time he noticed her, she was grown up and she'd stopped in the coffee room for a Coca-Cola. Carl sighted her slim, tweed-coated figure drooped over the counter in an attitude of listless boredom. In the mirror, she could see the three men who were eying her and she was playing Mysterious Duchess with them. If one of them had spoken she would probably have screamed with fright, but as long as the game kept to pantomime, she languished to her heart's content.

Carl sat down next to her. "How was the trip?"

She whirled and almost knocked over her glass. "Oh!" Then she recognized him. "Hello. It was lovely, thanks. You ought to go, too."

"Pick up any possible fathers? Or was it straight sightseeing?"

"Well, with Sonny along, nothing's ever in straight lines. For instance, we got taken up on the bridge where nobody else is allowed, and the captain taught us navigation. It was fun."

"How old is Sonny?"

She took the question as a roundabout method of getting at her own age, and her answer had the dignity of all the beautiful women who'd ever evaded the subject. "He's a year or two younger than I am," she remarked.

Carl murmured, "I see." He put a nickel on the counter, but she pushed it away.

"I couldn't accept," she said, as if the coin were a diamond engagement ring. But she was an embarrassed child again and she giggled. Carl wondered in what terms Sonny would hear of him and whether she'd propose Carl as a candidate to head the family. Wisdom suggested that he turn down the job before it was offered.

He shrugged and fingered the five-cent piece. "As you prefer," he said. "But a married man ought to be able to stake his new girl friend to a nickel drink."

She must have been thinking of M'ma, because she cried out, "You're married?"

"On my honeymoon," replied Carl. "It's still the first year."

It was a good exit line, and besides, Gabrielle was waiting down the street in a bar. This was her mint-julep day and she wanted to find out how many juleps a Southern colonel could hold and still be a lady. Or at least, that was the way she'd put it. Gabrielle never said anything simply when she had a chance to make it complicated.

When he entered the bar, he saw her near the back and he went toward her without noticing anyone else. She was wearing the turban thing on which his first comment had been, "All ears." But they were exquisite ears, obviously made to be seen, and at sight of him her smile was so broad that even her ear lobes crinkled. Carl, feeling a queer exaltation in her presence, wondered why the human race hadn't gotten around to producing more blondes with brown eyes.

He sat down and said, "Hello, Wiggin. You look beautiful."

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"That's why you married me. Remember? You said in a hushed whisper, 'Gabrielle, you are beautiful. Will you be mine?' "

"You got me mixed up with a book. All I ever said was 'Well, if I must, I must, and let the future take care of the hindmost.' "

"Whatever you said, you can't take it back any more. Where were you?"

"I just met you when you were sixteen and looking for a father. The kid in the tweed coat that I told you about."

"Oh. Why didn't you bring her along, Carl?"

"At her age? Juleps?"

Gabrielle fingered the film of ice on her glass. "The juleps," she said, "are lousy, but I suppose you're right. What's her name?"

"I haven't the least idea. She's here with her brother and her mother. M'ma, she calls her, in the continental manner. I guess we'll meet the rest of the family by and by."

"I guess," said Gabrielle.

They were very happy and very content, and far removed from murder. Or at least, so they thought.

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2: A PAIR OF DYNAMITE

In the old, balconied building that is known throughout the nation by the name of its proprietor, the diners sat stolidly and attacked their oysters Rockefeller, their gumbo and pompano and shrimp Creole. For the most part, they were tourists who would eat here once or twice, pilfer a menu and brag to their friends at home. "When we ate at Michel's, in New Orleans —"

The place had an air of dignified stuffiness. There were too many chandeliers and not enough light, too much silver and too much carpet. It made heavy going for the waiters, who plodded wearily across the big dining room and deposited their loaded trays with whispered prayers of thanksgiving. They were grave, elderly men, for they knew that a good waiter solemnizes the process of eating and, like a lozenge, is an aid to digestion.

Amongst all the people in the restaurant that evening, only the three in the corner were uncontaminated by the sedateness. They had brought along their own gaiety and the table fairly quivered with it. And in the semi-darkness that bathed the room with every order of crèpes Suzettes (*specialité maison*), the suggestion of thunderbolts, of burnt ozone and witchcraft seemed to hover over the trio.

It was just an impression, of course, for Millicent Keyser had no magical powers. If she had had, she'd have used them on her two children and kept the little wretches from growing up. They were sprouting indecently, for they knew perfectly well that they couldn't keep on like this without forcing her into middle age. And middle age was simply out of the question.

And yet here they were, fifteen and seventeen. Sis, of course, was nice about it and whenever there was a man around she pretended they were sisters, but Sonny shouted "M'ma!" clear across the hotel lobby and then came blustering over like a policeman chasing her off the grass.

"I'm piqued," she'd told him yesterday, and she must have wrinkled her nose, because Sonny had wrinkled back and then burst into laughter. And ever since, he'd been joking about it.

"M'ma's piqued," he'd say. "She set her bonnet for a Frenchman, and then I came along and spoilt it."

"I never could manage a Frenchman," murmured Milly. "There's something in the language."

"How about Nice?" asked Sonny.

Milly raised her napkin to hide the slight blush. "Oh, him," she said. "The one with the title. He had a gray mustache and I can see his face so clearly. But what was his name?"

"He wanted to go to the Casino," said Sis, "but he couldn't on account of us. We threatened to come along, and all the English dowagers would have stared."

"M'ma would have traded us in for puppies that evening," added Sonny. "Little Pekes, with ugly flat faces."

Milly sighed. "I'd have preferred anything to you two."

"But we got you out of it," giggled

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Sis.

"And it wasn't as bad as the time at Rapallo when I signed a check," said Sonny.

"With the wrong name," added Sis.

"I got away with it because I was a minor."

"You got away with it because you hid on the train till we crossed the border. You were scared."

"M'ma was scareder," said Sonny. "On account of that Italian."

"Pietro," said Milly. "But I still can't remember the name of that Frenchman. It bothers me."

"It doesn't matter," said Sis.

"If you remembered them all, you'd have a bad conscience."

"And headaches."

"And lumbago."

"And arthritis."

"Poor M'ma!"

She laughed softly. Tonight, of all nights, she could be indulgent. For, in a way that she feared to tell them, this evening marked the end of an era.

She wished she could ask their advice. They had such healthy, noisy instincts and she was accustomed to rely on them. But for once, this was entirely her own affair. She was surprised that Sis hadn't guessed. Or perhaps the child had, and then had forgotten. Which was all to the good. Milly could go there with that trusting simplicity she'd preserved through all the years. She got so mixed up whenever she tried to think things through. But when she merely went ahead and followed her heart, somehow she was never wrong.

The lights blinked again as a waiter served a silver platter with the low flame of burning rum, and Sis said, "Why do they put the lights out?"

"To warn you you'll have indigestion tomorrow," declared Sonny with authority.

Sis tried to be withering, but she succeeded merely in being radiant. It was so much easier. "How does darkness remind you of indigestion?" she asked.

"Nightmares," retorted Sonny.

Milly had done well by them. Even though she had dragged them across the face of Europe and sent them spinning through more schools than most children had even heard of, they'd thrived on it. They knew how to fend for themselves. They could adapt and their minds were quick and lively, and they knew how to make themselves liked as well as felt. And they were gay. If nothing else, Milly had brought them up to know the value of laughter.

Sonny interrupted her thoughts with a solemn assertion. "M'ma," he said. "You have a tryst."

She laughed quietly. "They didn't call it that at the store," she protested. "They just said it was the very newest thing to keep your figure trim."

But Sis refused to accept the evasion. "What's the matter?" she asked. "You have something on your mind tonight."

"New boy friend," said Sonny. "Don't you know the signs?"

"If you have a new one," smiled Sis, "You've got him bad."

Milly wished she could smile the way Sis did. Far-off and mysterious. Sis was almost beautiful when she wasn't being rowdy. Another year and she'd outgrow them almost.

"Children," said Milly. "You've never really had a father. How would you like —"

"No," said Sonny.

"We had one and you had to get rid of him," added Sis. "Don't you remember? He sicked lawyers on you."

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"He wouldn't support us."

"He didn't even send us birthday presents."

"All he ever did for us was to keep up his insurance and then die double-indemnity."

"Daddy was a stinker. You said so yourself."

"I might have been wrong," said Milly gently. "All daddies aren't stinkers. Don't you remember the one in the fairy tale that I used to read you?"

"This ain't no fairy tale," declared Sonny. "This is us."

"Who is he?" asked Sis. "Is it really that serious? What does he do? What does he look like? When do we meet him?"

"I'll tell you tonight, when I come home."

"M'ma," said Sonny, and he was on the brink of doubt. "You wouldn't do anything without consulting us, would you?"

"Horrors, no!"

"Swear it?"

Milly raised her water glass. "I swear by the nameless one who was ashamed of you in the Casino at Nice, I swear by the bedbug in Brighton and the indigestion we had at Biarritz that I will never marry without your full consent, and equally, without the disapproval of your Uncle Albert."

Sonny and Sis raised their water glasses solemnly and all three of them drank to within an inch of the bottom. So long as Uncle Albert disapproved, it was always all right. Then in unison, they completed the ritual by emptying their glasses on the carpet.

An elderly waiter frowned and trudged across the red carpet to find a bus boy to get a rag to soak up the water that had spilled near the corner table.

Milly watched without really seeing. She shouldn't have lied. Lying to each other was inexcusable, and violated one of the principles on which she'd always been most insistent.

Perhaps the lie was a portent. She wondered why she had to go alone, and to such a remote place. Why not one of the fashionable supper clubs with a nice orchestra and clean table cloths and everybody dressed up? She'd have worn the orange flame and she'd have ordered Planters' Punch and just taken a sip or two. Alcohol affected her so.

She shivered suddenly, and Sonny's hand touched her forearm. "Cold, M'ma?"

She looked around for an open door or a drafty window on which to put the blame, but there was none. "No," she said. "Well, just a wee bit, perhaps." Then she recalled a saying she hadn't thought of since childhood.

"Somebody stepped on my grave," she said, and tried to smile.

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3: THE SHADOW OF A LADY

THAT SAME EVENING, Carl and Gabrielle picked the wrong restaurant. They suspected it with the gumbo and were certain with the chicken.

Carl put down his knife and fork. The stone and plaster room was dim and low-ceilinged and broken up by pillars. The empty orchestra stand was framed in papier-maché painted to look like rock.

"The vaulting," said Carl, "is impressive, but I'll need bicarbonate for dessert."

Gabrielle smiled. "It looked so interesting from the outside and I was sure I'd heard the name somewhere. The Den. But at least we'll know where not to go next time."

"Sure. New Orleans. I don't like this town, Bree. It brings bad luck. Here I got written up as a criminologist and the hero of Murmur Lake and had my picture on the front page of the second section, and wherever I go nobody recognizes me. They had it all balled up, anyhow. They said I was a professor of philosophy instead of psychology, and they called me a sheriff when I'd told them I was about as official as a volunteer fireman from Weewich, Vermont. And then they wrote up the Riggman case and had most of the facts wrong. In fact, they had very little right."

"What difference, Carl? Your picture was there and they called you a hero. Where's the bad luck?"

"Here," said Carl, and he took the telegram out of his pocket. He'd been saving it for a dismal moment, and this was it. He opened the envelope and removed its contents.

He knew the message by heart. "It is our considered judgment that ever since your activity as a detective in the Riggman case you have been receiving publicity of a type that reflects unfavorably upon the college stop your New Orleans interview is merely one example stop after careful deliberation we have regretfully decided that your resignation would be to the best interests of all concerned. (Signed) Emmet Alden, for the Board of Trustees."

Carl watched Gabrielle knit her brows as she read. He should have told her about it before, in the privacy of their hotel room. She'd have cried, and then he'd have taken her in his arms and consoled her and they'd have gone out to celebrate. But this way, he'd have to baby her over the stained linen and some second-rate gumbo. She'd be worried about money, too, and start reading the price list on menus. Well, he'd order champagne and the hell with the money. That would reassure her.

But when Gabrielle looked up, she was beaming. "Carl!" she exclaimed. "How marvelous!"

"Huh?"

"Don't you see?" she asked. "Now there's nothing to interfere with the book and all the articles you've been talking about, and I can go back to radio singing and we'll make gobs of money and complain about our income tax, or else we can retire to the country

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somewhere and grow lean on love. I don't care, darling. I'd have made a rotten faculty wife, anyhow. And I love you to get fired because then I can be a helpmate and the staff you lean on, just like the minister told me to when we got married. Now I'm the rock of ages and you can be a leaf in the wind and pursue me. We'll have fun, Carl — we're free!"

She grinned delightedly.

"You're nuts. We're broke and I'm fired and I'll never get another teaching job as long as I live. You can't get bounced in this profession and land somewhere else."

"Who cares? With your abilities, you'll always get to the top."

"You don't have to console me," he said tartly.

"I'm not. I'm just stating the very simple facts."

"The facts," said Carl, "if you care to face them, are that I made the authorities jealous by solving a murder and marrying a suspect. I was always too progressive for them, anyhow. And then, when I was in the limelight, I took a crack at their dignity. I said that trustees weren't philanthropists, and I stripped off their caps and gowns and left them shivering in their unearned increment. This New Orleans interview gave them their chance, and they took it. I don't give a damn, but at least I know what happened and I don't romanticize it."

"Neither do I. But I wish you wouldn't be so completely and miserably downcast."

"I'm not. And I felt swell, until you pulled that Pollyanna line."

"Oh, Carlo — let's not fight. You kept the telegram all day and then for some reason you showed it to me now, and maybe I'm a little angry about that. Won't we be better off if we each get by ourselves for a little while and digest this? Let me go back to the hotel, Carl, and you can walk it off or do anything you want, and later on we'll both be a little calmer and then we can really talk it over."

"Damn good idea," said Carl. "Scram."

Her mouth went down at the corners. Then she flashed him a wry, twisted little smile and went out. Carl stared at the tablecloth and racked his brains for a sour thought. He demanded misery, and there was none of it in Bree.

He paid the check and went out through the barroom. It had more lights and more sawdust on the floor, but was almost as depressing as the restaurant. He sat down at the bar and made a quick inventory of his assets. One brain, in good state of preservation, with a life expectancy of some forty years. One wife, ditto. One bank account, with a probable life span of six months. Well, he had his sour thought.

He knew exactly what Gabrielle wanted to suggest and what he'd reply. "Carl, why not be a detective?" "Who, me?"

He turned to stare at the girl who strolled in from the restaurant. She had coal black hair and black, piercing eyes punched into the deathly pallor of her skin. She was wearing slacks and a striped jersey sweater, and she walked with a slow, lascivious grace. Carl was certain he hadn't seen her at dinner. He'd have noticed her anywhere. She was striking.

The bartender said, "Want a drink, Miss Trevis?"

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She nodded. "Scotch. Where's Mr. Benning, Al?"

"Went upstairs some time ago. Didn't you see him?"

"I came down through the restaurant," she answered. "I was thirsty." She poured the scotch into a glass of seltzer and gulped it down. Then she took a cigarette from a flat, enameled case, and the bartender leaned forward and struck a match. She inhaled deeply and blew smoke in a thin, satisfying stream. Her eyes narrowed and the satisfaction on her white face was so intense that Carl wondered whether the cigarette was drugged. He sniffed vaguely but couldn't tell.

"Thanks," she said. Then she turned away and floated past Carl. He followed her with his eyes until she had disappeared in the doorway of the dining room.

When Carl looked up, the bartender was watching him.

"She work here?" asked Carl.

The bartender didn't answer the question. "What's it to you?" he said.

Carl shrugged, plopped a coin on the bar and went out to the street. The place and everything about it annoyed him. The food was punk and he'd scrapped with Gabrielle and the bartender was surly and the girl in slacks irritated him. At a rapid pace, Carl set off for the hotel.

Well, what about being a detective? Sooner or later, he'd have to battle it out with Gabrielle. He'd had a taste of police work and he had a suppressed desire for more, but what of it? Thousands of people wanted to be crime investigators, but the police were infinitely more efficient, and who paid an investigator when the police would do the same job for nothing? Nevertheless, Carl hankered.

He felt, too, that he had something special to contribute. He was a trained psychologist and he was anxious to apply his knowledge to a new problem. To the maimed mind, to the shattered personality that has been forced through the wringer of a murder investigation and left in a permanent pancake shape. Carl used the phrase *psychic trauma* and meant the bitterness against society, the frayed nerves and the morbid fears of persecution which can so easily become the heritage of an innocent murder suspect. He wanted to do a paper on it for one of the psychology journals.

He found himself at the hotel and he marched through the revolving doors. But he didn't feel like going upstairs yet. He sat down in one of the big red chairs in the lobby and looked around. This was where the girl had dropped her hat the other day. He wondered where she was and what she was doing.

The first thing he noticed about the woman sitting opposite was her hands. Slender, tapering fingers picking nervously at a black glove and making a slight, rasping sound. Then he glanced upward. A small, bright face, a soft, clean skin, and eyes that blinked anxiously.

Suddenly she got up. Carl frowned in annoyance. She'd whetted his curiosity and then walked out on him. Probably had a date who hadn't shown up. It was no worry of Carl's. He had his own problems. How to get in on a murder case.

He had a reputation, as a result of the Riggman case, but what were his actual qualifications? The best book-lore, a keen mind and a talent for

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crime detection, but almost no practical experience. Take something as simple as shadowing, for instance.

The nervous woman with the small, bright face returned to the empty chair and began picking at her glove again. Carl, with his vivid curiosity about people, kept watching her closely.

Take shadowing, for instance. Why not test himself? A sort of game to discover what she was worried about. A contest with himself, to learn why Madame X's fingers picked at her black kid gloves.

She took a scrap of paper from her bag and glanced at two or three words of writing. She looked at her watch, folded the paper, unfolded it and then abruptly crumpled it and dropped it on the floor. Carl stared at the paper. He felt helpless when the hotel porter spotted it and swept it into his dustpan.

The woman rose hesitantly. Carl watched the porter and watched Madame X. She approached the elevators, turned and looked at the big clock in the lobby. She checked her watch, started for the desk and changed her mind. She stopped in front of a mirror and adjusted her hat. The porter was out of sight. Carl could hunt him up and for a quarter he could get the piece of paper, but he might lose Madame X. And she had finally made up her mind and had headed for the street entrance. Carl followed.

It was just a game, of course, and yet it had already become something more. Madame X appealed to him. She was upset and uncertain of herself, and Carl's curiosity was tinged with sympathy.

The street noises grated on his ears as he stepped outside. A trolley, the music from a radio shop, a couple of auto horns, someone laughing raucously and a newsboy shouting, "Read about the big plane crash! Read all about the —"

She had climbed into a taxi and the driver had turned around and was asking her something. Carl strolled toward the head of the taxi feed line and didn't signal until Madame X's cab had started. Then he stepped to the curb and the yellow hack pulled alongside.

He jumped in and said, "Follow that cab ahead. Not too close, and don't let them know you're tailing."

The driver liked the idea. "Sure. Just leave it to me, boss." He ground his gears and Carl dropped back against the cushions. He was laughing to himself. His blood seemed to bubble pleasantly through his veins. His dark gray eyes, spaced widely behind his small humped nose, gleamed with excitement. He felt grateful to all the trustees who'd fired him.

The cab crossed the broad width of Canal Street. Two wide lanes of traffic separated by four trolley tracks. Lights on the pavement, lights in the center of the avenue, lights in the shop windows. A steady stream of traffic, crowded sidewalks and great colored gashes of neon.

The taxi crossed and plunged into the narrow tunnel of Bourbon Street, in the old French quarter. The Den whisked by. For a few blocks the restaurants and night clubs cast intermittent patches of light. There was still noise and the reflected activity of Canal Street. The pavement was sprinkled lightly with drunks staggering from bar to bar or emerging from the dives of Conti Street. Then the drunks and the hot spots were behind. There

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was no sound except the hum of the taxi and the honk of a distant horn. The houses were dark and quiet and exuded an odor of damp stone. The night air had wetted down the dust, but the air itself was dirty and laden with a thin river mist. Ahead, a pair of moving red lights pulled like a lodestone. Madame X.

Carl had been wrong about her date in a hotel lobby. Her appointment was evidently somewhere else, and she'd wanted to arrive on the dot. And when she got there, drew up in front of a house and rang the bell, what was Carl supposed to do? Wait in his taxi, or dismiss it and patrol the house, or invent an excuse for going inside or what?

The cab reached Esplanade Avenue and turned down the dim, tree-lined street that led to the river. The old houses were separated from each other and were fronted by gardens or else cut off by high walls. The fog had thickened. The red dots of the other cab flared into orange as the stop-lights flashed on. Carl's driver turned around. "Now what?"

"Just drop me here," said Carl. He gave a large tip and strode forward. He saw Madame X take her change and glance around as if she wasn't sure of her bearings. Then she started up Chartres Street.

Carl slowed his step. Here, at its lower end, Chartres was a dingy working-class district. Narrow and quaint like all the streets of the old French quarter, it began at the Federal jail, picked up a few Italian groceries and an ice plant, dropped them for the famous Cathedral of St. Louis and the broad square in front of it, tossed off a few blocks of old arcaded houses with their antique iron grill-work and then went as commercial as if it were in Topeka, Kansas.

The gathering fog made it easy to follow Madame X. After a block or two, Carl wondered why she had left her cab at Esplanade instead of going straight to her destination. Excess of caution? A feeling of shame or a pathological quirk or just a plain ordinary desire to walk off her nervousness?

Naturally. That had to be the reason. That, and perhaps the fact that she was early and wanted to waste a few minutes time.

Carl visualized her small, bright face. It would be more worried now. The small, delicate mouth would be tighter, the eyes would be shiny with fear or anticipation. The complicated machinery of her body would be hard at work, breathing and digesting and pumping blood and flashing electric impulses along her nerve paths. Describe her scientifically and put her in a diagram and you couldn't tell her apart from Gabrielle. But put the two of them in a room and a complete idiot would know they were different. Carl the psychologist wondered who was right, the idiot or the scientist, and whether it mattered.

She was walking quickly and she kept glancing up at the numbers on the doorways. She was obviously a stranger, for she not only was unfamiliar with this section, but she was unaware that the numbers ran a hundred to the block. Once, when she saw two men approaching, she crossed the street and then crossed back as soon as they had passed.

Carl quickened his stride and narrowed the distance. The fog was denser and it cut off the rest of the world

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so that they progressed in a kind of isolated affinity, from the glow of one street lamp to the next. He tried to imagine Gabrielle here, frightened but determined, seeking a house on this dark, misty street. But if Gabrielle were here, Madame X would be back in the hotel room, waiting.

Gabrielle and Madame X. They attained a queer confusion in his mind until he was almost uncertain which one of them was walking a few yards in front. He seemed to penetrate her thoughts, as if he had attained the perception of a long intimacy. He sensed that she was meeting some deep crisis for which nothing she had ever done had equipped her.

She stopped at a doorway, and he halted in turn and watched. She looked up at the number to be sure it was the right one. She adjusted her hat, opened her pocketbook, took out a mirror. She tucked back a wisp or two of hair but did not apply powder. She held the door latch for a couple of seconds before she opened it.

Carl frowned and his gray eyes went murky and puzzled. Now what? Follow? But how would he know to which apartment she'd gone? And even if he found out, what could he say? Something glib and convincing. He could claim she'd dropped something when she'd opened her pocketbook. A key. That would do it.

He stood there, debating whether to enter. Suddenly he told himself he was a fool. She was just a visitor who'd met an artist and thought it was romantic, to go to his rooms in the French quarter. Romantic, and naughty. And Carl had played a game with himself and lost. Tomorrow he might see her in the hotel lobby and scrape up an acquaintance. And besides, there was Gabrielle to think of. He'd left her in a huff, and he didn't want to aggravate their disagreement.

The shot sounded out sharply, from inside the building. A window slammed. Carl's thin, nervous features jerked. He glanced up and down the street, hoping he'd see a car and decide the sound was just a backfire. There was nothing but fog.

For two or three seconds he hesitated. Hundreds of noises can sound like a shot, and murder doesn't show up when you go looking for it. Maybe a shade had banged. Abruptly, he sprinted for the doorway.

Madame X had not used a key. Carl slipped the catch and kicked at the door. He stood well to the side, out of the possible line of fire. He saw a narrow corridor, maybe twenty feet long, lit by a feeble yellowish bulb. A pushcart stood at the far end of the corridor.

The woman lay on the concrete floor. She lifted herself weakly and she groaned, but she couldn't rise. Carl rushed forward. Then, for the first time, he grew aware of the other man.

For all his life, he remembered that instant and that scene in every one of its details. At his feet lay the woman with the small, bright face, not yet in pain, but stunned and shocked and with the skin stretched unnaturally tight. She didn't understand what had happened. Her hand reached out to touch Carl's trousers and her fingers gripped the cuff and tugged with a feeble, helpless insistence.

Just beyond her, the pushcart partly blocked the mouth of the corridor. Through the arch, the cobblestones of a courtyard were gray and indistinct

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The pushcart itself was piled with miscellaneous junk. A couple of lengths of pipe. A rusty wrench. A few blocks of newly sawed wood. A wad of brown burlap. And the gun. It lay in the pushcart and pointed directly at Carl.

The little man was squeezed in the narrow space between the pushcart and the wall. He must have been on his way out and had stopped when the door opened. His left wrist was crooked and his hand dangled. He wore a stained, torn, rain-streaked, sweat-soaked hat with a raveled ribbon, a shapeless brim and a three-inch cut in the crown. His clothes were in the same dilapidated condition as his hat and they hung from his narrow shoulders like rags draped over a chair. His face was hidden in a bushy brown beard. The eyes were light blue, and they glanced in terror.

For a second they stared at each other, Carl and the frightened little stumble-bum. Then the bum flung himself forward and struck out savagely. Carl bounced back against the wall and banged his head. He felt two quick blows, but they didn't matter. The bump on the head had temporarily stunned him.

When his brain cleared again, he was sagging against the wall. The slam of the door and the patter of footsteps echoed in his ears. He whirled, charged toward the door and pulled it open.

The street was still foggy and deserted, except for a little man dashing around a corner and disappearing in the mist. There was no chance of catching him. Carl uttered a snort of disgust, wheeled and re-entered the corridor. The woman was still lying there.

He knelt down. Her brown eyes were filmy and uncomprehending, as if she couldn't realize she'd been shot. Carl pillowed her head on his lap and bent close to her. He felt wetness on her dress.

"Why did he do it?" he asked. "Who was he?"

"Me — me," she muttered slowly. Blood flecked her lips and the taste of it must have scared her. Her eyes grew wide and she gasped.

Carl noticed her pocketbook, a modish suede with big gold initials. M.K. He opened the bag, took out her handkerchief and dabbed at her lips.

"Who did it?" he asked again. "And why?"

"Not — to — me — me," she whispered. "You — never."

Her eyes fluttered and the lids drooped shut. Carl, bent low over her head, smelt the clean fragrance of her hair. Like Gabrielle's. Gently, he stroked the woman's cheek. Her skin was soft, creamy. He felt an infinite pity and now, in the shadow of death, he felt the tenderness of a lover. He recalled his musings of a few moments ago, when he had been confusing her with Gabrielle and wondering whether to follow inside. No longer did he have to worry what he'd say. She had accepted him now, as he had accepted her.

Footsteps thumped brusquely on the cobblestones of the courtyard. Carl called out, "Get a doctor, quick. And the police." Then he turned back to the woman.

Her eyes were open again and staring at him, but the brown pigment was misty and she seemed to be crying. Her lips moved in slow painfulness and he barely heard her.

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"Call — me — me — me," she whispered.

"Call you what?" asked Carl quietly. But her eyes fluttered shut again and she lost consciousness.

He kept staring, tenderly, feeling her tragedy in a queerly personal sorrow. He sat there stonily, lost in the saddest emotion he had ever experienced, until someone tugged at his shoulder and bellowed hoarsely at him.

"Get up, you. What did you shoot her for, huh?"

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4: THE COP AND THE CANARY

CARL HAD BEEN AWARE of the people crowding into the arched doorway, but they didn't count. Only the woman lying in his arms mattered. But now, with the appearance of the cop, Carl looked up for the first time.

"Suppose you see about an ambulance," he said. "She's badly hurt."

"Just leave that up to me, fella. The ambulance'll be along in a couple of minutes, and so will the chief and the homicide men. What I want's your statement."

"Statement?" repeated Carl. Then the import of the word bumped him squarely into reality. Here he was sitting in a darkened corridor with a woman who had been shot. He was visibly upset and there was no sign of anyone else. The gun was lying in a pushcart a few feet away and the tale of the little bearded man was fantastic.

Carl wondered whether he could ever make anyone understand. How explain the complicated motivation that had made him chief mourner at the side of an unknown woman? What cop would believe in the process of substitution by which Carl's mind had exchanged wives for a few minutes in order to attain an emotional balance which Gabrielle had denied him?

He said, "I never saw her before in my life." The sentence sounded lame and unconvincing. The cop stared coldly and Carl turned away. By his apathy, he was practically accusing himself. He snapped out of it and snorted. The gun, of course. That would clear him. The weapon found at the scene of the crime and bearing somebody else's fingerprints.

He glanced at the pushcart. Then he blinked and rubbed his eyes. The revolver had vanished.

Carl's first thought was that the stumble-bum had grabbed it and run. But that was impossible. In the first place, the little man would have used it to shoot his way clear. And in the second place, he had rushed past the gun before striking, and he hadn't turned back.

The street door pushed open and a big, hulking man plowed his way through the people jamming the corridor. "Get the hell out of here, you-all. Beat it, see?"

He towered like a totem pole with a long, wooden face. His eyes had the luster of old, weatherworn paint and he sized up the situation as if it were just another routine case that would keep him from seeing his girl or going to the movies or whatever else he'd planned.

"Shooting, huh?" he drawled to the patrolman. "This the guy, Mac?"

The cop said, "Looks like it," and the big man grabbed Carl's shoulder. "Come on, you — get up!"

He tugged at Carl and spun him to his feet. The woman's head struck the concrete floor of the hallway and she lay there in a twisted, sprawling heap. Carl felt himself thrown across the corridor and thumped against the wall. He spluttered, "Lay off. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Detective White. Come on — what

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did you do it for?"

Carl swallowed. White wasn't the kind of man to argue with, and Carl didn't try. He stalled in the hope of maintaining the status quo for the next few minutes.

"Do what?" asked Carl.

"Wise guy!" muttered White, and dropped a big paw on Carl's shoulder.

Carl said, "Listen — somebody else was here. Better see if there's another exit and then bottle it up. You'll have plenty of time for me later on. I'm not running away."

"You're damn right you're not!" roared White. He looked at the cop. "See if there's any other way out of here, Mac. Through the courtyard, maybe. And don't let no one out. Now — you. Going to answer or do I get tough?"

"I had nothing to do with this."

"Sure. Looks that way. Who is she?"

"I don't know."

"Listen," said White. He glared sullenly, as if he wanted to hit Carl but knew he shouldn't do it with people watching. Exactly how White would have decided the question, Carl never found out. A siren wailed from the street and somebody said, "There they are."

White's hand dropped from Carl's shoulder and he thundered, "Get out of that corridor, all of you. That's the boss-man now."

Carl straightened his tie and glanced down at the woman. Her hat had slipped from her head and revealed her black, glossy hair. The taut expression had left her face and the features were relaxed. Perhaps in death, perhaps merely in unconsciousness. Again Carl was struck with a sense of deep but meaningless pathos. She was so obviously a woman made for the smaller things of life. For tea parties and boat trips and light, agile banter.

Her leg twitched unexpectedly, in a spasmodic straightening. Well, at least she was still alive. The knowledge stiffened Carl as if she had given him a signal of encouragement. He turned and watched the door open.

The short, stocky man at the head of the police procession was Police Chief Richard Crowder. He strode in aggressively, like a welterweight entering the ring, and White saluted him.

"Woman been shot," he said. "Looks like this guy done it. We found him sitting there and making love to the dame and not giving a damn about nothing else."

Crowder faced Carl and said, "Why'd you do it?"

Carl took his time about answering. He realized the importance of his first words and realized that the Chief of the New Orleans police force had to be a man of ability. And yet, Crowder didn't impress him with intelligence. Energy, yes. Force and ruthlessness, yes. But the subtleties and the imaginative qualities of a first-grade mentality seemed to be absent.

Carl determined on caution. To be frank, and yet volunteer as little information as possible. Nothing about the gun, since it wasn't there. Nothing about having seen the woman at the hotel or about following her on the street. That would only complicate matters.

Crowder repeated his question in a sharp, belligerent voice. "Come on — why'd you do it?"

Carl answered slowly. "I didn't. I happened to be passing and I heard the shot. I was trying to help when the first

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policeman came in and assumed I knew her."

Crowder muttered, "Yeah?" and stepped past Carl and bent down over the woman. He eased her head and felt for the beat of her heart. Then he examined the wound and stood up.

"Where in hell's that ambulance?" he stormed. "These damn doctors stop off for a drink every time they get called out of the hospital. Them chest wounds. Can't tell a thing. Well, you — what the hell's your name?"

"Carl Wayward."

"Oh, Wayward."

Maybe fame wasn't a fake, after all. Crowder seemed to know the name and must have read the newspaper article. But it made him no more friendly. "Sheriff, huh?" he snapped. His blue eyes were cold and blank.

"Some newspaper men wanted a story and they got it. I'm a college professor down here on a visit. Stopping at the Hotel Louisiana. You'll want some identification." He took out his wallet with his driver's license and some traveler's checks. "The criminology business," he added, "is a hobby."

Crowder stared at the papers. "Anyone in town know you?"

"My wife. The hotel people. The reporters who interviewed me. A few friends. Listen — if this woman recovers, she'll tell you she never saw me before in her life. What do you expect me to do when I hear a shot? Run home and let somebody bleed to death?"

"She won't recover," said Crowder dryly. "You're safe."

A few minutes later an ambulance surgeon confirmed the statement. He knelt down, listened briefly with his stethoscope and then made a short examination. When he stood up, his pronouncement was a simple one.

"Dead. Bullet came up just below the ribs and pierced the left lung. Either nicked the heart or else a hemorrhage got her. I'll stick around a while."

So it was murder, and the dead woman's last words were an unintelligible message that would never be completed. "Call — me." Call her whom? Or what or where or why?

Crowder returned Carl's papers. "All right, Wayward. Let's have your whole story."

"There's not much," said Carl. "I was walking along Chartres, toward Canal. This woman was about a half block ahead of me and I noticed her turn in here.

"I was almost opposite when I heard a shot. It seemed to come from this house, so I took a chance and went in. The door was unlocked and I found her lying there, where she still is. A little bum looking scared and punch-drunk — blue eyes, flat nose, bushy brown beard, clothes like a scarecrow — was just coming out. He was alongside the pushcart and he smelt like wet garbage."

Carl hesitated and again wondered about the gun. Since the stumble-bum hadn't taken it, whoever had it might still be on the premises. The question was whether to give Crowder a brand new mystery which he might not believe, or whether to keep the case an issue between a down-and-outer and a college professor complete with his Ph.D.

He decided not to mention the gun. Crowder was bound to look for it, anyhow, and he'd uncover his own mystery.

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"For a moment," continued Carl, "we were both so surprised we didn't even move. Then he rushed me. My head hit the wall and knocked me dizzy just long enough for him to break away. I followed him out to the street and saw him heading toward the docks, but he was too far ahead and there was too much fog. Besides, I was in no mood to get shot and I wanted to see if there was anything I could do for the woman."

"Was she alive when you got to her?"

"Yes."

"She say anything?"

"I asked her who'd done it, and why. I asked her a couple of times. She was very weak. She whispered 'Call me,' and then she passed out."

"So what you want us to believe," said Crowder, "is that this little bum held her up or something. Snatched her pocketbook, maybe, and then shot her when she resisted, huh?"

It was White who said, "Her pocketbook ain't around anywhere, Chief."

Carl didn't move. He was suddenly aware of the weight of the purse in his own coat pocket. And yet it was impossible. Nobody could have put it there, and certainly he hadn't gone in for robbing dead bodies.

But that was exactly what he must have done. He recalled picking up the bag and taking her handkerchief. Thereafter his mind was blank, but he must have stuffed the purse in his pocket and not even been conscious of his action.

He started to speak, but Crowder had already gone off on another tack. "If you beat it out to the street and chased this guy, we'll find somebody that saw you."

"The street was empty," said Carl.

"There's always somebody," observed Crowder. "I had a case once where a guy was knifed and then pushed into a canal out Metairie way. Nobody around for miles. And then sure enough, some guy shows up and says he was in the grass there with a dame and saw the whole business. But you take this here, in the middle of the city — there's got to be somebody." He turned to a plainclothesman. "Take a few of the boys and get going. You heard this guy's story — check on it. Whether he went in here before or after the shot, and whether anybody ran out of here and how many." Then he addressed Carl again. "I'm giving you a break, see? We don't like to bother the tourists. You come on a vacation and we want you should spend your money and mind your own business. So if you're dishing it out straight, you got no worries."

Carl didn't answer. The bag in his pocket seemed to weigh ten pounds and to bulge like an inflated balloon. He folded his arms and squeezed past the pushcart.

The courtyard was vast and smelt of paint and hops and dampness. At the far side, the space under the balcony was boarded with heavy lattice and divided into garage cubicles. An old truck was parked near a water tap. There was a truck entrance leading to the side street, but it was closed and barred with heavy iron fastenings. The ground floor was apparently used as a garage and warehouse, but the second floor was residential. The tenants were gathered at the bottom of the balcony stairs and were chattering in Italian. A cop was firing questions at an old man who kept shrugging and saying, "You theenka I lean over from the balcon and look, hein? You theenka that's all I gotta do

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for the night, hein? And me with Rosa home!"

Carl took off his coat and carefully wiped his forehead. He flung the coat over his arm, with the pockets concealed by the folds, and strolled thoughtfully toward the garages. The residents of the building weren't the kind the dead woman would have gone to see. And yet, she'd come specifically to this house.

Carl yawned, raised his coat and took the bag out of his pocket. He slid it into the hand underneath his coat. All he had to do now was to reach the garages and slide the purse through one of the slats. Then his worries would be over.

The cop who had first arrived on the scene spotted Carl across the courtyard and called to him. Carl waited near the ancient truck. The cop came close and lowered his voice.

"I heard what the chief was saying and I thought maybe I could give you a little advice. You're a stranger down here. Never been to N'Orleans before, huh?"

"No. What of it?"

"Well, you look all right to me. And even if you ain't, a fella's got a right to take care of himself. That's what the law says. So I figured I'd tip you off about the chief. We call him the Bulldog around here. What he gets hold of, he don't let go. And he's got you."

"What are you driving at?" asked Carl. "And look — whose side are you on? His or mine?"

"It ain't a question of sides. A man's got a right to a lawyer, and I figured I'd tip you off."

"What the hell are you supposed to do in this town when you hear a shot?" demanded Carl. "Hire a lawyer?"

"You still don't get it," said the cop patiently. "You're not just the guy that found the body. You was sitting there with her head in your lap and nobody else around. Maybe you had nothing to do with it, but maybe you're behind the eight ball, irregardless. That's all."

He stood there studying Carl in the dim light of the courtyard and waiting for something. Carl sat down on the running-board of the truck and slung his coat over the fender.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Carl.

"Me? Nothing. I just thought that maybe you'd want a lawyer. Or if you get locked up later on, you might want somebody to hire one for you. My brother's in the business. Charles McGibbon. You can look him up in the phone book."

"I'll think it over. Thanks for the tip."

The cop raised the back of his cap and scratched his ear. He had no intention of leaving. Now that he'd given his advice, he wanted to stay and be sociable.

Carl was figuring out a way to get rid of him when Crowder's voice roared across the courtyard. "Wayward! Come over here."

Carl said, "Tell him I'll be over in a minute, will you?"

"What's the matter with you? Something keeping you?"

"Of course not," said Carl sharply. He stood up and flung the coat over his arm, but he left the black, rectangular bag in the angle of the fender. He felt exceedingly clever until the cop spoke. "You forgot your book."

He was pointing at the shadowy shape of the purse. Carl picked it up sheepishly and slipped it under his coat.

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He was clutching the pocketbook tightly as he crossed the courtyard. He felt as if he were carrying a time bomb that was slightly overdue.

An elderly woman with stringy gray hair was talking to Crowder when Carl reached the corridor. Two or three detectives were examining the walls and floor, and a camera with a flash bulb had been mounted on a tripod and was aimed at the dark huddle of the body.

Crowder turned to the gray-haired woman and said, "That him?"

"Yes. I can tell it by his walk. Those long legs of yours, Mister."

Crowder nodded. "I told you, Wayward. There's always somebody looking out of a window. She saw you on the street. Said you were following the dame like you didn't know her and was working up the nerve to pick her up. Good-looker like that — why not? So she saw you standing there on the street when she heard the shot, and later on she saw you chase the little fellow out. You wanted that dame, huh? Dead or alive. Well, reckon I'll have to turn you loose."

Carl grinned. "Sorry I couldn't be of more help, but you can reach me any time. I'll be in town another couple of weeks, at least." He nodded and started for the door.

Crowder blocked him. "Haven't got a gun, have you? Better frisk him, White."

Carl remarked, casually, "You don't bother much about the law, do you?"

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"The law of search. You have no right to go through my pockets unless there's actual suspicion of felony. You know that, don't you?"

"I reckon we don't care that much about the law. Search him, White."

Carl bit his lips. He could object, and get knocked cold.

He trembled as he raised his arms wide, with the coat held away from his body to let White pat his pockets and sides. Then Carl pointed to his topcoat. "This too?" He held it with the two side pockets showing.

White grunted and dug his hands in them. "Got an inside pocket, haven't you?" White had a curiously defiant expression as if he knew exactly what Carl was concealing.

An officer in a lieutenant's uniform passed Carl's line of vision and said to Crowder, "Got it! Cartridge shell, lying right there in the pushcart. Looks like a thirty-eight revolver."

Crowder took the brass casing and said, "Nice going. This is Wayward over here. Wayward, Lieutenant Villard's in charge of the local precinct. He might want to get in touch with you."

Carl stepped forward and shook hands. Villard's face was a blur of hope. Carl said, "Glad to know you. I'll show you where this little fellow went, if you want to come outside. Anything I can do to help —"

Villard smiled. "Not necessary, thanks. Better go out the other way. The corridor here's locked."

Carl said, "Sure." White's big hand fell on his shoulder. "You want to finish up?"

"Finish what?"

"That inside pocket."

Carl repeated the words stupidly. "Inside pocket? Of course." Villard glanced wonderingly. Carl slanted his hand so that the bag was clear of the pocket. His heart was pounding and his forehead was damp with sweat.

White didn't even try to locate the

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inside pocket. His hand felt underneath the coat and clutched the purse. Carl held onto one end of it, pointlessly, as if the feel of the suede meant safety. White stared hard and withdrew his hand.

"Nothing," he said. "The guy's clean. Okay to take him out, Chief?"

Crowder muttered, "Sure," and White towered above Carl as Carl squeezed past the pushcart and crossed the courtyard.

"You can go out the truck door," said White. "I just want to make sure you don't get stopped." His voice lowered in sarcasm. "With that thing on you."

Carl halted. White said, "You and me, we ought to have lunch tomorrow and talk this over."

Carl nodded. His throat was tight and dry. He licked his lips and stared at the sullen, totem-pole face.

"Let's see that driver's license of yours again. I want to check on the numbers."

Carl took out his wallet. White grabbed it and opened the money compartment. He removed twenty out of the twenty-one dollars and returned the wallet to Carl.

"Thanks," said White. "Tomorrow, I'll be around for the big stuff. You better be ready." He drew the heavy bolts of the truck entrance and the gate creaked open.

Carl started to walk through, but he stopped partway. "That bolt," he said. "It's locked from the inside. Was it that way all the time? Is that how you found it when you got here?"

White nodded. "Sure. What of it?"

"Nothing. Except that it's — well, peculiar." As he stepped out to the street, he felt White's gaze riveted on his back.

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5: BLACKMAIL FOR BEGINNERS

CARL WALKED BACK to the hotel because he needed solitude in which to think and adjust himself. He'd gotten out of an awkward situation nicely, and yet he was no more out of it than a Joe Louis setup sitting on a stool between rounds. White was certain to start trouble at the next bell. And Crowder, if he found no promising lead, would come back to Carl. And he'd come slugging.

It was queer how half an hour can change the point of view of a lifetime. Until the present, a cop had been a big guy with a club ready to smite any stray Philistines who happened to annoy Carl. Right now, a cop was an enemy who could find a stolen pocketbook, illegally removed from the scene of a crime. Crowder or anyone else had the full right to throw Carl in jail. It made a difference. A crazy game and an evening's amusement threatened to put him into the incredible situation of having to solve a murder in order to clear himself.

But that was storybook stuff. He was innocent and nothing in the world could connect him with the dead woman, for the simple reason that there was no connection.

Except a taxi driver.

Carl patted the pocketbook. He'd examine it and send it anonymously to headquarters. He'd refuse to pay White, and White could do nothing without admitting he'd been guilty of blackmail and a serious dereliction of duty. The problem was as simple as all that. And yet it wasn't. Because Carl knew that White was no novice at blackmail and that he had some trick up his sleeve. After all, White had left him a whole dollar.

Carl marched into the lobby. The cigar counter was closed, but the clerk nodded at him and the telephone girl smiled and slowly winked a brown, thyroid eye. Carl stepped into the elevator and said, "Seventh." When he took off his hat, his hair wasn't even mussed.

He rapped at the door of his room and Gabrielle's, "Come in," was sulky. She was reading and she scarcely glanced up when he entered. He tossed his coat and the pocketbook on the bed.

"Hello, Bree. Lonesome?"

"*You* weren't. Do you know what time it is?"

He glanced at his watch. "Almost midnight. I hadn't realized."

"You must have been enjoying yourself."

"Not exactly."

"Carl, I don't mind your going out alone. I told you to and you have a perfect right to, but you might have the decency to call up and let me know you'll be late." She slammed her book closed. "I was worried, Carl, and lonesome. I kept telling myself I was a fool, but at midnight I was going to phone the police."

He restrained himself from taking her in his arms. Instead, he remarked casually, "You'd have called the right place, anyhow."

"What do you mean?"

"I had some trouble with the police.

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I filched a pocketbook right under their noses and they almost caught me."

"You what?"

"There, on the bed. Better see how much money's in it."

"Are you mad? Talk sense, Carl. Where'd you really get it?"

"From a corpse. How much is there?"

She rose, gave him a polite but you'll-regret-this-you-lug smile, picked up the pocketbook and dumped the contents on the bed. "Eighteen cents," she said. "Did you have to shoot her for it?"

"Oh, no. Somebody else did that. You know perfectly well I never carry a gun."

"Be lucid, please."

"I tried to be, but I'll repeat. In plain English, I stole the pocketbook from a corpse. Of a freshly murdered woman. A cop caught me with the bag, robbed me of twenty bucks and expects me to buy him a lunch tomorrow. And pay heavy sugar, too. Thus far, I have a net loss of nineteen dollars and eighty-two cents."

"You're being difficult," said Gabrielle.

"I was only playing detective, and I followed a lady and horned in on a murder. I surprised a little bearded bum at the scene and got socked. I'll show you my black and blue marks later on. I stayed with the lady and fell in love with her while she died. Then the cops came and assumed I'd killed her. By swiping the bag, I led them to deduce it was a purse-snatching job, but I didn't exactly get away with it. Maybe we better leave town."

"Carl," said Gabrielle in an awed voice. "Come here, quick."

He walked over to the bed and took the small identification tag which she handed him. He whistled slowly and gazed at the rest of the contents of the bag. They were commonplace, but the tag wasn't. It read, "Property of Millicent Keyser, care of AJ Masterson, New York City."

"Gabrielle," said Carl. "If it were just a guy by the name of Masterson, there'd be a street address, wouldn't there? But this — it has to be *the* Masterson. How many people can you think of who'd just give their address as New York City? There'd be Masterson and Rockefeller and — think of anyone else, offhand?"

"What of it? Why so excited? He's just a wealthy man whom you usually cite as a vicious reactionary. And now that you think you can meet him or write him a letter or something, you act as if he'd promised to buy you a college."

"Gabrielle," said Carl softly. "The man has money. Maybe I'd better explain."

He sat down and gave her a detailed account of the case. "If you'd seen her type," he finished, "you'd have known why she had Masterson in the bag. And Masterson won't want the relationship to hit the papers, particularly when she ends up as a murder victim on another man's doorstep."

"I thought it was a corridor."

"Don't be technical. My point is that Masterson could drop a million and still travel on private trains and have lunch money left over, and he'll pay to have this suppressed. I don't know whether I can go through with it, but I know damn well I'm going to try."

"You mean blackmail him?"

"Let's use nice words, Bree. Let's pretend we're going to give all the

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money to the Red Cross. We can change our minds later. I'm simply going to suggest he let me represent his interests. You know how delicately it can be done. The way it was suggested I resign."

Gabrielle Wayward smiled her most innocent smile. "Carl, you're still worried about that, aren't you?"

"I liked the idea of a salary check. I used to be conventional that way. But now that I intend working for a fee, my fees are going to be something colossal."

"I always knew we'd be rich," said Gabrielle happily, "but I never dreamt it would happen tonight."

Carl picked up the phone and said, "Long distance operator. I'd like to speak to Mr. AJ Masterson, New York City."

Gabrielle kissed him. It was her form of immoral support.

They sat there for a long while, holding hands and gazing at each other. When the phone rang, Carl picked it up. "Hello?"

"Are you the party who wished to speak to Mr. AJ Masterson?"

"Yes."

"He is not at his New York residence, but he can be reached in Washington, D. C. Do you wish to speak to him there?"

"Sure."

"Just a moment, please." The moment lengthened. A couple of operators told him to hold the wire. A voice answered and told him Masterson couldn't be disturbed. Carl argued and someone else asked him questions. Carl repeated his name and insisted that his business was personal. He was finally told that Masterson himself would speak.

Carl sighed. Bree's head was pressed close to his so that she could hear. Carl said, "Beat it, darling. You get my attention all divided up, just when I need my best brains."

She kissed him at practically the same time that a crisp, dry voice slapped along the wire. "AJ Masterson speaking. What do you want?"

"My name's Carl Wayward. That may not mean anything to you, but —"

"It does. Psychology professor. That Riggman business."

"I'm speaking from New Orleans, and I have news which may be a shock. You know a Millicent Keyser?"

"My sister. What's she done now?"

Carl said, "Oh." He'd guessed wrong, and thus far he was stuck for twenty bucks and the price of an overtime phone call to Washington. Gabrielle, who was back at the earpiece, squeaked with some abstruse, feminine delight. Carl continued, ruthlessly now and not even trying to soften the blow.

"She was shot about an hour ago. Through an accident that isn't important, I happened to learn her identity ahead of the police. I thought I'd get in touch with you before turning in my evidence. It's apparently murder, though the facts are still pretty jumbled."

"Murder!" murmured the voice. It had lost its crispness, like a box of biscuits left out in the rain. "So that's how she ended up!"

"If you want details, I'll tell you what I know. Though there isn't much."

"Just a minute, Wayward." Masterson hesitated so long that Carl wondered whether he'd left the phone. Then Masterson's voice spoke again, dry, unemotional, and yet somehow labored.

"I think I understand what you're driving at, Wayward. You're hinting at a man, and a scandal of some kind. The

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papers — they're not on to this, are they?"

"They'll know a woman was killed. There's always a chance that some smart reporter may identify."

"Not likely. She wasn't known. And she mustn't be, until I get there. You're working for me, Wayward, and I'll see that you don't regret it. My orders are to shut up about everything until you see me. I'll fly down and get there by morning. Meet me at the airport. Say around eleven. Do the children know about this?"

"What children?"

"I forgot you didn't know Milly. She was stopping at the Louisiana with her two children. You'll earn all I can pay you if you save me the job of breaking the news. You may find them difficult, but you're a man of ingenuity and you'll have to figure them out yourself. I never managed it and neither did anybody else. But I'm warning you — they were brought up wrong and there's no guessing what they'll do. So keep them quiet and don't admit you've been in touch with me. You can tell them the reasons for silence pertain to Milly. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Then remember that I pay well for what gets done, and nothing for blunders. Anything else?"

"Yes. Just hang on to the first part of that sentence. I'm taking risks." Carl slammed down the receiver and leaned back.

Gabrielle said, "He talks like that movie actor I never saw because I don't like him. Better reverse the charges, Carl."

"Chickenfeed," murmured Carl. He picked up the phone again. "Can you tell me the room number of Mrs. Millicent Keyser?"

"Keyser?" drawled the hotel operator, in her best Southern accent. "Just a moment, Mr. Man . . . Room Nine-forty-three."

"Thanks," said Carl. He cradled the phone. "Want to get in on this, Bree? It has all the earmarks of a nasty job."

"Of course, silly. Just give me time to put on a dress."

Carl walked to the bed and stared at the pocketbook. Then he opened it and absent-mindedly stuffed it with the lipstick, powder, the mirror, the few coins and meaningless odds and ends that Gabrielle had dumped out of it. He was chuckling to himself as he clapped it under his arm and left the room.

When he returned, Gabrielle was dressed. She said, "Don't look so mysterious, Carl. Where'd you put it?"

"The sandbox where you drop cigarette butts. Never can tell when the police might come looking. Perfect?"

"What happens if a porter changes the sand?"

"Then we lose. Hell — I took a chance on you, didn't I? I guess I can take a chance on a pocketbook."

They walked up to the ninth floor and moved slowly down the corridor, hating what lay ahead and wanting to delay it. At the door, they halted and Carl looked down at Bree. Her brown eyes, so familiar and expressive, held nothing but worship. Carl gulped. He hadn't made the world and he hadn't made Gabrielle, but of his own free will he'd singled her out from all people. Which was a damn lie, as any psychologist knew.

He leaned down and kissed her. "Ready, Wiggin?" She nodded and he rapped sharply on the door.

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Carl entered and the girl called, "Hello, M'ma. We're all —" Then she turned and saw him. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's you!"

It was the girl he'd met in the lobby. She was wearing pyjamas and a tan, belted dressing gown, and she had arranged herself like a pillow in one corner of the couch. Stretched regally at the opposite end was a rugged, stocky lad of fifteen or sixteen. He had the exaggerated aggressiveness of somebody who had grown up too soon and taken on responsibilities before he was chronologically ready for them. He was barefooted and seemed more interested in wiggling his big toe than in reading his book.

At sight of strangers, he closed his book noisily and stood up. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And what's the meaning of this?"

"I have some bad news for you," said Carl.

They gazed at him and he felt their silence as if it were a physical thing, a steady pressure gathering in his ear drums. He wanted to be tactful, but only the simple, ugly words came. "Your mother's had an accident," he said. "A severe one."

The girl whispered "Oh!" Sonny grabbed her hand. "She's dead!" he shouted hoarsely. "She's been killed, hasn't she?"

Carl nodded slowly. "Yes." And then Sonny bit his lips and said "How?"

"She was shot."

Sonny straightened up and threw back his shoulders. "Well, well," he said. Then his voice broke, whether from emotion or adolescence. "So they got M'ma at last! Now who do you suppose did that, Sis?"

"One of her beaus must have done it," answered Sis, in a false tone of boredom. "Usually, they just kill each other off, but this time one of them must have turned his gun on M'ma. I was telling her just yesterday, there's no chivalry left."

"Uncle Albert," said Sonny, "will be real pleased. He always predicted a bad end and he hates to be wrong."

"Who's Uncle Albert?" asked Carl. He kept thinking of Millicent Keyser with her head resting on his lap.

"AJ Masterson," replied Sis. "He's M'ma's brother, but he always disapproved of her. Now he'll have nobody to disapprove of except us."

"I suppose we'll have to let him know, since he's in the family," said Sonny. "But I think I'll wait till after the funeral. I'd hate watching him pretend to mourn. It might make me sick."

"Sorry — I've already sent for him," said Carl. "His name was in her pocketbook."

"We don't want him," said Sonny. "He's a boor."

"If there's anything we can do, Gabrielle and myself, we're right here in the hotel. I'm going to ask the desk to transfer all your calls to my room. When the police and the papers get hold of this, they'll make it hell for you."

Sonny grunted. His upper lip was shaky and he rubbed at his eyes. He tried to say something, but his mouth twitched and he swallowed a couple of times without speaking. He spun around, crossed the room rapidly and entered the bathroom. He slammed the door hard.

Sis stared blankly. "It — isn't funny," she said. The tears formed slowly, gathered in her eyes and trickled leisurely down her nose. She buried her face

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suddenly and began sobbing.

"It — isn't — funny," she repeated. "M'ma always taught us to be gay. We sort of — had to." She began to giggle, and then her whole body heaved and was wracked with sobbing. Gabrielle rushed to the couch and put one arm around the girl. She stroked Sis's soft tannish hair and murmured something in her ear. Presently Gabrielle looked up and glanced reproachfully at Carl, as if she thought he ought to go to the bathroom and act like a father.

It was hours later when the Waywards reached their room. They were emotionally exhausted, but in each of them smoldered a furious rage at whatever or whoever had brought about the tragedy, and at the whole mad sequence that made Sonny and Sis try to pass off their mother's death as a joke.

"What's the answer?" asked Bree. "What were they hiding? Were they just ashamed of their feelings, or was there something specific that they were afraid to say?"

Carl shook his head. "I don't know. But I do know that they were waiting for something, because they were both tired and they hadn't been reading very long, or much."

"How do you know that?"

"Their books. They were open near the beginning, and at their age you don't start reading a book at one in the morning. That's what you do for insomnia."

"Then they were waiting for Mrs. Keyser. They expected something to happen. Is that it?"

Carl nodded. "Yes," he said. "And maybe it happened."

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6: IN THE WAKE OF A TYCOON

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Sis showed the effects of her ordeal. She was pale and wistful, and her grayish-blue eyes were strained. She kept saying to Carl, "Go on. Please go on. I want to know."

Gabrielle was still asleep and Sonny had gone out on some errand as to which Sis was significantly vague. Carl had knocked at her door and found her ordering breakfast. He'd accepted the invitation to join her and she had asked him for a detailed account of last night.

"I spoke to your uncle," he finished. "He wants me to work for him and he's flying down this morning. I'm not sure what he expects, but I'm holding up everything till he gets here."

Sis nibbled her toast from the center and left a thin, artistic edge of crust. "Please," she said. "When he gets here, I don't want to see him."

"Why not? You can't very well hide out on your only uncle, so you may as well get it over with instead of making an issue."

"He interferes with everything we do. That's why M'ma — I mean —" She picked up her coffee cup and pretended to sip. "We were always very close, M'ma and Sonny and me, and Uncle Albert belittled us and tried to pry us apart. Sonny and I can handle things. We're grown up —" her eyes peeked over the coffee cup — "and we decided to tell you please not to mind if we act a little crazy. But we don't want to talk to Uncle Albert."

"How long since you've seen him?"

"Just before we left New York. We were living with him, or at least M'ma was while we were away at school. He did things for her about money."

"How come you're not at school now?"

"We took a vacation to chaperon M'ma. She was always getting into trouble. I mean, she might have got married. We wanted her to, but she usually fell in love with the wrong ones. It was funny. Almost as if she did it on purpose."

Carl poured coffee. It was not funny. Millicent unconsciously choosing the impossible ones so that she couldn't go through with it. Perhaps a deep-rooted aversion to marriage, a sense of loyalty to Sis's and Sonny's father. The situation was all too common.

"Where was she going last night?" asked Carl.

"She didn't say."

"And you have no idea whom she expected to see?"

Sis's fingers toyed with her coffee spoon. "No. No idea."

"Then why were you and Sonny waiting up?"

"We couldn't sleep, and then we got talking and it was late and we decided to read until she got home. One never knew, with M'ma."

"You knew she wouldn't go to a place like that."

"Well, she fell in love with a gondolier once, in Venice. They went paddling all night long. Maybe she was going to visit a relative of his, since it was an Italian neighborhood."

"What was his name?"

"Pietro. He had the most beautiful

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baritone, but he was married. M'ma was furious when she found out."

"Didn't she approve?"

"Well, being married put him in the fascist business. Of making more fascists. So naturally she couldn't approve."

"Sis," said Carl, "Let's make a promise to tell each other the truth. No concealments between the two of us."

Sis picked up a piece of toast, examined it and decided there was nothing but crust. "Well, maybe his name wasn't Pietro. M'ma always got mixed up on names."

Sis didn't make sense. A child of seventeen. Yesterday she'd been an impulsive little gamin with her emotions clipped onto the outside of her dress, and today she was a *grande dame* evading issues and breakfasting in a bright orange negligée.

Carl said, "What happened to the robe you were wearing last night? I liked it much better."

Sis clutched the silk folds tightly around her shoulders. "This is M'ma's," she said tensely. "When I got up this morning, I sort of had to put it on. I didn't want to, but I had to. It's awful of me, isn't it? Her clothes!"

Carl laughed easily. "Not a bit. Why don't you change?"

"I will!" she exclaimed. "I'll do it now. I didn't want to wear this and I was hoping somebody would tell me. I'm so ashamed!"

She got up and ran into the bedroom. Carl leaned back and tried to dope it out. A compulsive act, arising from an unconscious desire to substitute for her mother. Wearing her clothes was the symbol. But was Sis trying to be her dead mother in order to compensate for some guilt feeling, or trying to be the living mother in order to carry on with some project?

When Sis returned in her trim, boyish robe, she seemed thoroughly composed. She sat down at the table and smiled with a shy, friendly gratitude.

"Tell me more about this little man you saw at the courtyard," she began. "Will the police find him?"

"They'll try."

"When they do, can I speak to him?" Carl jerked up his head and frowned, and Sis went on hurriedly. "I know it sounds funny, but he was the last one to see M'ma and he may have noticed something that wouldn't mean anything to anybody except me and it would be an awfully good idea if I could speak to him. Ahead of the police. Can I?"

"How could I manage that? I don't run the police force."

"Well, you never know what's going to happen and it's just possible you might be able to fix it, and if you can, will you?"

"I suppose so," said Carl. He gave the promise idly, convinced he'd never be called on to fulfill it. "But I don't see what he could possibly tell you."

"Carl, please — this isn't an ordinary case. It's too frightful and unreal. When you see Uncle Albert, make him give us money. Lots of it. Tell him if he doesn't that maybe —" she looked up at Carl and her bluish-gray eyes were glazed and frightened. He thought of the little stumble-bum last night staring with the same utter panic. "Maybe," she ended breathlessly, "I'll have to kill myself!"

She leapt up and her knees thumped the table and sent the china clattering. She cried "Oh!" and ran for the bedroom and slammed the door.

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Carl walked over to the telephone. "Give me Mrs. Wayward, room seven-eighteen." He stared at the bedroom door. From the earpiece, Gabrielle's low, throaty voice murmured, "Yes?"

"Listen, Sleepy-Head — this is the guy you slept with last night. I'm at Sis's and the poor kid's upset. Put on your best kimono and come on up and be useful."

"Oh, Carl dear — what did you do to her? You really should stay here instead of annoying young girls at daybreak."

"The damn day broke hours ago."

"You must have done something wrong, darling. But I'll hurry right up."

Carl replaced the phone and walked over to the window. He didn't take the suicide threat seriously, but the impulse behind it was another matter. Sis was in the fragile balance of change and she had undergone a shock that would have floored anybody. Except for Sonny, she was friendless and alone in a strange city, and naturally she was scared. Her fear needed an outlet of action, and having none, she was dramatizing.

She fitted into the pattern of Carl's interest, too. The innocent suspect. A sensitive personality being dragged into a police investigation. And she was in the midst of her first important battle with life. She was making the major adjustment of adolescence and trying to reconcile her chastely erotic dreams with the hostility of the outer world. She undoubtedly had certain clues to a murder, but, for Carl, they were unimportant compared with her problem of development. She needed the confidence that victory would give her, and Carl-the-detective had to be submerged in Carl-the-psychologist. She not only was the case study he'd been looking for, but she appealed to his sympathy and to his protective urge. He'd be almost willing to wreck a murder investigation for the sake of her mental well-being. In many ways she was a far more interesting puzzle than the twin mysteries of a little bearded stumblebum and of a gun that had vanished from a pushcart.

Carl let Gabrielle in and then took the elevator downstairs. His program for the morning was simple. To get to the airport before he was hauled in by the police for further questioning. He felt uncomfortably certain that in due time Crowder would get tough, if only for the fun of playing with a college professor.

But it was worse than that. As Carl crossed the lobby, a big totem-pole rose from a chair and stalked over to block Carl's path. Detective White said, "Morning, Wayward. Sleep well?"

"Beautifully. What brings you around?"

"I made it early instead of late. I made it breakfast instead of lunch."

"Made what?"

"Our little talk."

"What do we talk about?"

White frowned as if he'd heard a dirty word and couldn't quite believe his ears. "About that pocketbook," he said. "About the deal we're going to make."

"Pocketbook?" murmured Carl.

White got the idea then. He sighed deeply and rocked forward on his toes. "You can't get away with that," he said. "I'll pull you in and spill what you done."

Carl shook his head. "In the first place, there isn't any evidence — any

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more."

"I don't need evidence. All I need is this." He bunched his big fist and slammed it against his open palm.

Carl heard the sound with his stomach, but he grinned pleasantly. "And in the second place, as soon as you make a charge, you convict yourself."

"Maybe you don't understand," said White. "You don't get charged. You don't even get booked. You just get hauled in, and there's no record that we got you. Your friends or your lawyer can't find you without a record, and while they're looking, we slam you around a little. We haul you from one precinct to the next, and every time you get moved, you get beat up. But that's nothing to the beating you get while you're in the can. By and by, you begin to see sense."

"Nuts," said Carl calmly.

"You think I'm bluffing, huh? You think I'm just making it up. Listen — you can look it up in the papers. They got it all there, what we did to them reds back in thirty-eight. Some guy even went and wrote it in a book. He had all the dope, how we give a guy a yellow slip instead of charging him, and then keep him as long as we want. Hell — we don't bother with the courts."

"I thought this was America," said Carl.

"This is America all right, and you better stay in it. Here, in N'Orleans."

"Sounds more like a taste of Nazi blackmail."

White's big hand plopped on Carl's shoulder. "We better get this straight, Wayward. Somehow, you got the idea I'm crooked. You think that if you'd killed that dame last night, you could have bought me off and walked out of that courtyard free."

"If I'd had enough cash — sure."

"Then you're a damn liar. There ain't enough money in the whole world to buy me off. But hell — when I come across some poor slob that's in a jam, why can't I make a few bucks out of it? It's just business, that's all. I got to make a living, same as the next guy."

"My impression was that you had a salary to live on."

"That!" said White dryly. "You want to grow up."

"Your point of view is interesting," said Carl, "but how in hell did you convince yourself that when I walked off with the bag, I wasn't taking the key to the whole murder? And how'd you know I had the purse, in the first place?"

"Sticking out of your pocket when I come in. You almost lost it when you stood up, but that didn't bother you and so I figured it didn't matter. Then, when the chief made that crack about a purse-snatching job, I knew I had something. You probably didn't bump the dame, and I got to thinking I needed a new car, and the rest of it just fell in my lap." White smiled as if he were highly pleased with himself. "But if you want to save yourself a few dollars, you could tell me anything you found out."

"Your mind's getting too active, White. Give it a rest. You had your annual celebration last night."

White shrugged good-naturedly and Carl walked through the lobby and crossed the street to the garage. When he drove out, a grimy black sedan fell in behind him. In the mirror, Carl saw White's bulky shoulders and his long, totem-pole face. The detective made no attempt at concealment.

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Carl tried to shake him in traffic, but gave up when White took to crossing red lights. Leisurely, Carl turned into Canal Street and rolled toward the river. The thoroughfare ended in a great semi-circle with parking space for dozens of cars. A freighter was churning downstream and a dirty little oyster-boat fought the current and the swell of the bigger ship. Across the river, the factories and shipyards of Algiers clustered along the levee.

Carl watched a paddlewheel ferry work clear of its wharf and begin its crossing. He started his coupé suddenly and raced for the ferry entrance. His tires squeaked and he almost clipped somebody's fenders as he shot toward the head of the line. He called out an apology that he didn't mean. He was the second car in line and White was some distance behind.

Carl lounged at the wheel while the next ferry landed. With its split bow, it looked like a pair of boats joined by a funnel and an over-all deck. The superstructure was an island in the center of the deck, and cars were loaded onto the broadside near the bow, driven around the superstructure, ready to complete the circle and disembark opposite the point of exit.

Carl bumped over the narrow gangway, swung around the deck and stopped. He was close to the entrance and White's car was wedged solidly in the pack. So far so good.

Carl climbed out, gave a folded bill to the guard who was handling traffic and explained that he'd forgotten something and wanted to leave without crossing the river. He was practically ushered ashore and he drove leisurely up the gangway. On the ferry, a big man waved his arms helplessly and yelled, "You son of a —." But White was blocked off by the other cars and there was nothing he could do. Carl had a half hour's start and a feeling of virtuous composure.

He drove through a suburban section of unimpressive little houses with small flower gardens and clumps of azaleas. He was rapidly maneuvering himself into an awkward spot. White apparently didn't get sore easily, but once he got mad he was likely to carry a permanent grudge. Which left Carl with the choice of returning the bag and facing charges of withholding evidence, or of keeping it and getting his kidneys mashed to a soft pink paste.

It occurred to him suddenly that he'd never even thought of the third alternative. To pay up. White would probably sell out cheap, and for a couple of hundred dollars Carl could get clear of the whole mess. He was amazed that he'd refused to consider paying graft, and he marveled at himself for at least a quarter of an hour. This was something Gabrielle must have done to him. The old Carl would have left town or paid up, and bragged that cowardice was common sense. But the new Carl mapped out his line of battle and almost enjoyed himself.

He saw the expanse of Lake Pontchartrain ahead, blue and vast as the ocean. A broad boulevard lined its shore, but it was the flatness that impressed him. There must be thousands of people in and near New Orleans who had never seen a hill in their lives. Carl tried to formulate the psychology of the man who had never seen a hill. He was still formulating when he reached the airport and parked in one of the grass areas.

There was little activity this morn-

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ing. Only one hangar was open. A few rickety air taxis had been wheeled out and one of them was gassing up. A big transport plane, parked on the edge of the concrete apron, was idly spinning its propellers. The platform in front of the low modern building was broad and empty and reminded Carl of an amusement pavilion out of season. He wandered around until he found a uniformed attendant.

"I'm meeting AJ Masterson's plane," said Carl. "How do I find out when he's due?"

"Coming in now. He just reported a couple of minutes ago. That ought to be him, up there."

Carl stared at the east and watched a dark speck grow larger, spread miniature wings and circle once to head into the wind. It swooped down and turned into a silver monoplane with twin rudders. The Beech 18S roared across the field, taxied over to the main building and came to a stop.

The cabin door opened and a dark, slim, wiry man stepped onto the small ladder and climbed down. Behind him came a handsome youth with a mustache, but by the way they both turned and looked behind them, it was clear they were not the main show.

Carl approached the plane as the king himself emerged. AJ Masterson balanced himself with his cane and shook off the attendant who offered to help him on the last step. Then he looked up and sighted Carl striding toward him.

"Mr. Masterson? I'm Wayward."

"Glad to know you, Wayward." Masterson gripped Carl's hand. Carl sniffed nervously and sized up the magnate. It was not easy while the sharp greenish eyes were fixed on him. They had a hard, impelling magnetism and they practically told you that Masterson was tough, and that if he let up on you he expected your gratitude. And yet the man had distinction, both in his bearing and his features. The nose was long, high, thin, the mouth was a straight slash across the heavy flesh. But always, the eyes dominated.

After a long, embarrassing moment, he released Carl's hand. "Suppose we go to the hotel and have a cup of coffee. I've been looking forward to New Orleans coffee all morning." He turned to the youth with the mustache. "Check in at the Louisiana, Arthur. Get those letters off and call my local office. Tell Ritter to drop everything and be ready for me. Aaron and I will be along later." He swung back to Carl and then introduced the dark slim man. "This is Mr. Aaron Bettner, my trouble shooter and right-hand man. Got a car, Wayward?"

Masterson took complete charge of the arrangements. He climbed into the front seat, stretched his legs, rolled his shoulders and said, "Take the rumble, Aaron."

Carl glanced at Aaron, but Aaron's expression of amused detachment intimated a complete indifference whether he rode in a rumble, on a fender or in the splendor of a ceremonial coach.

"There's plenty of room in front," said Carl.

Masterson grunted. "We may as well be comfortable. Climb in back, Aaron."

"I said there was plenty of room," repeated Carl stubbornly. But Aaron's dark, intelligent eyes signaled to avoid making an issue, so Carl shrugged and went on, "Besides, the lock's jammed."

For the record, Masterson made a show of being crowded, and promptly

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dropped the incident as too petty to bother with. "Let's get down to business, Wayward. Do they know yet who she is?"

"No, not yet. The morning papers only gave it a couple of paragraphs. Unidentified woman shot on Chartres Street. From her clothes and the New York labels, she was obviously a tourist, and nobody down here admits that tourists ever get anything except entertainment."

"Naturally. They don't want to ruin their business."

Carl started the car with a deliberate jerk. If the Keysers had an anti-Masterson union, he wanted to join. He turned to Masterson and said, "You're not particularly interested in finding out who killed your sister, are you?"

"Why do you think I came down here?"

"That's a question I've been asking myself. It's about time to ask you."

"I'll be perfectly frank, Wayward. Ordinarily I wouldn't bother with what happened to my sister. If she was murdered, it was probably her own fault."

"That's a comfortable theory, but it wouldn't bring you all the way to New Orleans. You're not by any chance worried about yourself, are you?"

"Nonsense!" snapped Masterson. "I came because the publicity could be embarrassing. The sooner and the quieter this is cleared up, the better I'll like it. Milly had a lot of friends in Europe and some of them are undoubtedly on the wrong side of the fence. I hold big government contracts and I can't afford to be connected with certain political views. Am I clear?"

"No. Why tell me? Why not pay me off and go home? You don't know me."

Masterson's quick, alert eyes flashed. "I know a great deal about you. Don't think I'm fool enough to travel a thousand miles to talk to a man I know nothing about. Besides, you had sense enough to call me instead of turning over your information to the police."

"I'm merely a detective trying to get business."

"You talk as if you were trying not to get it." Masterson's tone was clipped, reserved, slightly contemptuous. Later on, Carl came to speak of that particular inflection as the Federal Reserve note in Masterson's voice. "You're interested in making money, and why I hire you is my affair. What do you think of him, Aaron?"

"He'll do," said Aaron. "I'd rather trust him than the police."

Masterson nodded. "Five thousand," he said.

"Not enough," remarked Carl.

Masterson frowned. "You're a college professor, aren't you? An extra five thousand ought to be pretty welcome."

"I'm an ex-professor, and right now I'm ready to turn highway robber."

"Please don't be stupid," observed Masterson. "And remember that any time you want a teaching job, I can always manage to get it."

Carl burst out, "If you think —" and then Aaron's hand dropped on his arm. Aaron said quietly, "Make it five for a retainer and another five when he performs, and no promises thrown in."

"So be it," said AJ. He took Carl's consent for granted and turned back to Aaron. "How do we stand down here?"

"Pretty good. I'll get in touch with the business offices of the papers. They're — well, they buy advertising

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like any other paper, I guess. For the rest, there are two or three people you ought to see personally."

"What will it cost?"

"Not a cent. Later on it might be a good idea to make some contributions." He glanced at Carl and hesitated. "I'll tend to that part of it, AJ. Suppose I make the appointments for you as soon as we get to the hotel, and then you'll have the rest of the day free."

"Go ahead," said Masterson. "Wayward, I hope you understand what I'm doing. The police department will give you complete cooperation. I'm leaving Aaron here and he can advise you on anything that comes up. From now on, you're running this town and you'll have to let people know that you know it."

"You make it sound important, but you still haven't explained why I'm hired."

Masterson shrugged. They had reached the downtown traffic area and he leaned back contentedly, as if he enjoyed the gas fumes and noise. "It's simple enough," he remarked. "If some of these crooks get anything on me, they'll try and squeeze me dry. Whereas if you get something, I can smash you like a two-bit peddler."

He smiled.

"Thanks for the compliment," said Carl, edging the coupé forward. "And as long as we're being frank, let me say my little piece. I'm not making a phony investigation. I won't suppress evidence or protect anybody that's guilty. This is a murder case, and I expect to solve it."

"Naturally. I'm not in the habit of throwing away money."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Here's the hotel. I'll park and then meet you in the coffee room."

But Carl circled the block and entered the hotel from the rear. He owed his prospects to the possession of a pocketbook, and now that he could admit having it, he wanted the talisman in his hands. Besides, it was a good idea to examine it more carefully.

He took the elevator to the seventh floor, lit a cigarette and waited for the door to close. Then he knelt down and dipped his fingers in the sandbox. He felt nothing. He frowned, rolled up his sleeves and dug deeper. The pocketbook was gone.

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7: WAYWARD IN WONDERLAND

CARL MARCHED into police headquarters and merely announced his name. A uniformed cop saluted, said, "The chief's waiting for you, Mr. Wayward," and took Carl straight to the big office with the title "Chief of Police" engraved on the glass door. Crowder got up and grunted, "Been waiting for you."

Carl had a giddy feeling. He couldn't remember falling down a rabbit hole, but apparently he had, and now he'd tasted the "Drink Me" bottle and was ten feet tall. This was the first town he'd ever owned, and he liked the experience.

He said, "Is a certain Detective White here?"

"Not right now, but he ought to be along pretty soon."

"I'd like to see him when he gets here."

It worked. Crowder pressed a button and said to the dictograph, "Let me know when White shows up. Mr. Wayward wants him." Then Crowder leaned back and didn't slap Carl in the mouth and didn't book him on a felony charge for being alive.

Carl relaxed. "What have you found out, so far?"

"Not a hell of a lot. We got the cartridge shell from the gun. Found it in the pushcart, which means the killer must have been standing there, just a few feet away from Mrs. Keyser. We got a few finger smudges and we got the bullet that the medical examiner dug out of Mrs. Keyser. Take a look at the report."

Carl studied the technical description. The bullet, fired from a .38 calibre revolver, had traveled upward from a probable distance of a few feet. It had grazed the heart and perforated the left lung.

Mrs. Keyser had died of an internal hemorrhage.

The bullet and the cartridge shell had been competently photographed, but there was nothing to compare them with. The fingerprints were badly blurred and would probably be useless. No gun and no further evidence had been found.

Carl watched Crowder.

"How about the people living in the house?" asked Carl.

"Just three Italian families, and no hook-up with Mrs. Keyser. Four apartments upstairs, one of them empty, and garages and the warehouse downstairs. Why she went there — you got me."

"Any ideas?"

Crowder nodded.

"There's only one way I can see it. Somebody planned this job and told her to go to that house. The killer was waiting there, probably hid behind the pushcart. As soon as she got close enough, he let her have it. Not even time to talk. About that purse-snatching theory I had last night — anything in it?"

Carl shook his head.

"No."

"That's what I thought. McGibbon says you had a book with you, but he didn't see it so good and you didn't

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have a book when White went through your pockets. I'd have saved myself a hell of a lot of trouble if I'd thrown you in the can. Then you couldn't have got Masterson down here to cover you up. You got that pocketbook, haven't you?"

"No."

"What are you trying to put over?"

"Nothing," replied Carl. "I had the bag and I lost it. But I'm not covering anything and I never saw Masterson before in my life."

"We may as well get this straight, Wayward. Having a guy like you walk in and run my department just about burns me up." His cold blue eyes stared stonily. "I got my orders from the top, and I can't do a damn thing about it. But the minute that changes — and it's going to change, don't kid yourself — the minute you lose your drag, you better get out of town so fast you don't even raise dust."

"You have the wrong angle, Crowder. Nowbody's being protected, and I'm out to get whoever killed Milly Keyser."

"Yeah," sneered Crowder. "You can talk."

"I'll give you complete cooperation, with only one restriction. The Keyser children. They're not involved in this and I don't want them dragged in or even questioned. They're just kids."

"You got your signals mixed," said Crowder. "Young Keyser was hanging out on my doorstep when I got here this morning. Been waiting since seven o'clock. Said his mother had been killed and AJ Masterson was his uncle and he'd raise hell if we didn't get busy. The kid gave me a list of his mother's friends down here and told me she was having an affair with one of them and was probably engaged to be married. Then we went over to the morgue and he identified, and I was just getting organized when I got a call Masterson was in town and you were stooging for him and I was to drop everything and turn the investigation over to you, so I sat here and stewed around while you stuffed a fancy lunch down your gullet, and now you walk in and have the nerve to talk about co-operation. What do you want me to do? Go jump in the river or knock your block off? Because either one would be a pleasure."

"As between the two," remarked Carl, "you can take the river, but I don't think it's necessary." He took a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to Crowder. "That's the list of Mrs. Keyser's friends that her daughter gave me. How do they check with Sonny's?"

"Sonny, huh? So that's the matter with him. I'd rather shoot a kid of mine than call him that. Sonny Keyser!" Crowder picked up the list. "Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Huntington. Dr. Walter Pritchard, dentist. George Stokely. Clarence Barnett. Arnold Quintz. Yeah, same as I got. I'll bring the whole bunch down here and get their alibis."

"And find out which one of them had cocktails with Mrs. Keyser yesterday afternoon or the day before. She saw somebody and learnt something disturbing on one of those afternoons. That's on Miss Keyser's authority."

Crowder returned the list. "When we get them, and get this little bearded bum, maybe we'll have something that we can use."

"Any trace of him yet?"

"He went down to the docks last

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night. A watchman saw him roaming around in the fog and almost took a shot at him. A little later on, he was seen on Canal Street. After that, he disappeared."

Carl said, thoughtfully, "He didn't kill Mrs. Keyser."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he didn't pull a gun on me. Put yourself in his place, Crowder. You've just shot somebody and then a guy walks in and blocks your only escape. You'd grab your gun, wouldn't you? The reaction would be almost automatic."

"So?"

"So it's screwy, that's all."

A bell began buzzing. Crowder switched on the dictograph and a voice said, "Detective White's outside."

Carl said quickly, "I'd like to see him alone, first."

Crowder growled at the dictograph. "Tell him to wait. The Duke of Windsor'll be right out."

White was lounging in the hall. His hands were shoved in his pockets and a cigarette was dangling from his lips. "You want to see me?" he asked sullenly.

Carl nodded. "Yes. You know the new set-up around here, don't you?"

White took the cigarette out of his mouth and dropped it on the floor. "You mean about this bastard Wayward sticking his nose in things?"

"You don't seem to like it," observed Carl. "I can think of some damn good reasons why you wouldn't."

White shrugged. "We're getting to understand each other real good."

"Thanks. I was thinking of a remark you made this morning. That when some poor slob gets in a jam, why not make a few bucks out of it. Funny how you remember things, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said White. "Skip it. What do you want?"

"Twenty dollars."

The totem-pole face gazed somberly for a few seconds. Then White sighed, took his hands out of his pockets and peeled four fives from his roll. Carl said, "Thanks. That's the first time I ever wanted to say that it wasn't the money, it was the principle of the thing."

"You're going to be damn sorry about this. Anything else?"

"I'm just beginning. I think I'll put on the rest of the performance in front of a witness."

"You learn fast," muttered White, and followed Carl into the chief's office.

Carl sat down and faced Crowder. "You asked me before where I got the pocketbook, and I didn't answer. Maybe you want to ask White the same question."

White glared. Crowder leaned forward aggressively. "I'm still chief, Wayward, and I can handle my own men without your butting in. Now what do you want?"

"Nothing. Just get me the stumblebum and I'll manage the rest."

"The little guy with the baby blue eyes?" asked White. "There was a fella something like that down at the bus stop. When he seen me, he pulled down his hat and went out on the street."

"Why in hell didn't you question him?" demanded Carl.

"Because he didn't have no beard and he was wearing a new gray suit. Besides, I was looking for some other guy that was more important."

"Who?"

"Some red. I wanted to turn him around and send him back where he

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come from."

Carl flared up. "Is this supposed to be a police department or the front office for a concentration camp? You have a murder case and a key suspect, and all he does is shave off his beard and the town's his. Holy mackerel! Realize what this means?"

"Just keep those cracks to yourself," said Crowder. "It means he got paid for bumping off the dame. I'll put him on the teletype."

"Don't be in such a damn hurry," exploded Carl. "Just write him a letter." He stalked off in cold anger. As he slammed the door, Crowder and White began laughing.

At the bus station, Carl checked on White's account. The ticket-seller remembered the incident. A little man with extraordinarily light blue eyes had been buying a ticket for Jacksonville. He'd turned around and seen White staring. The little man had grabbed his change without counting it and had rushed off. Furthermore, he hadn't boarded the Jacksonville bus which had left ten minutes later.

Carl left with the conviction that he was on the trail of the stumble-bum. And but for White's stupidity, the little bum would have been in police hands. And all Crowder did was to lean back in a chair and promise to put it on the teletype.

Carl knew he'd get nowhere fast unless he had police help. He couldn't dive into a strange town of a half million population and come up with his stumble-bum. And he couldn't earn his extra five thousand unless —

That was when Carl thought of Aaron Bettner. Carl had felt an immediate sympathy for Aaron, and Aaron had automatically taken his side against Masterson. Aaron knew his way around, and maybe he could get action out of Crowder.

Carl sighted Aaron through the open doorway of the hotel bar. He had a glass in his hand and was talking quietly to the bartender.

Carl burst in and said, "Finish your drink and come on out with me. I want to blow off steam."

"I'd like to, but AJ's due back and I have to see him."

"The hell with him. You don't have to see him now. He'll keep."

"I want to remind him to drop in on his nephew and niece."

"Kind of tough on them, isn't it?"

"Kind of," admitted Aaron. He was a man of few illusions.

Carl tried another tack. "If you want to be obstinate, stay here, but I have an idea where I can find this little stumble-bum."

Aaron picked up interest. "Where is he?"

"He just bought himself a ticket to Jacksonville and then got scared off. This town's a policeman's dream. A bottleneck north, another one east and another one west. One road in each direction. To the south there's nothing but bayous and Cajuns. All you do is guess which road, and then you go there and flag your fugitive. A couple of guys like us couldn't miss."

Aaron brightened up. "Maybe I could tell Arthur about AJ. Then we could buy some beer and sit on the roadside and hunt stumble-bums."

"Come on," said Carl. "What are you waiting for?"

The black snout of the convertible slid smoothly along the pavement and bobbed over the railway tracks that criss-cross New Orleans. Carl kept

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glancing at the sidewalks and looking for a little man in a new gray suit.

"I'll need help," he said, "and I don't trust Crowder one damn bit. Maybe he's just sore because he has to work with me, and maybe he has some interest in jamming the case."

"Probably scared. For all he knows, you'll dig up a carload of dirt and sell it to some magazine. He doesn't want publicity. He's an ex-crook and the police were never able to break up his gang. They finally had to make a deal. They took Crowder into the department as a police captain, with a promise of an even better job, and he broke up his own gang. Now he's chief. I'll show you his house some day and let you guess how he could buy it on a police salary."

"You know a lot about this town."

Aaron shrugged. "I've been around. Political publicity before I got my job with Masterson. What did Crowder tell you?"

Jerkily, because he kept studying every pedestrian and every car and truck he passed, Carl recounted his interview at headquarters. "Those boy friends of Milly's," said Carl. He fished in his pocket and found the list of names. "Seems like the best lead yet. Know any of them?"

Aaron studied the slip of paper and then wedged it in the crevice at the back of the seat. "They don't mean a thing to me. How far out do we go?"

Carl had passed the prosperous Gentilly section with its arcade of trees and its well-kept lawns, and he was bumping over another railroad track. Beyond, the road turned sharply and traversed flat swampland with yellow, wavy grass. A little restaurant had decorated the turn with a big sign in red letters. EAT.

"Looks like a good place right here," said Carl. "Cars have to slow up."

"Stop at the restaurant first and we'll get our beer," said Aaron.

Carl nodded and swung into the gravel parking space. He stepped out and left the motor running. The air was clean and fresh and he felt absurdly confident. If a murder suspect wanted to go to Jacksonville and was afraid to go by bus, he'd be equally scared of trains. Which left nothing but a road and the uncertainties of hitch-hiking.

The lunchroom consisted of a long, narrow room with a counter running most of the length. A heavy-set man in a dirty white jacket was serving a solitary customer. As Carl and Aaron entered, the customer turned around.

Carl stopped short and his heart took an extra beat and sent the blood rushing through him. The customer, holding a coffee cup in one hand, stared with extraordinarily light blue eyes. His beard had been shaved and he was wearing a neat gray suit and a new hat, but the eyes gave him away.

Carl said, "You —" and at the same moment the little man heaved his coffee cup. Carl ducked and backed up to block the doorway. The little man charged forward and yelled in a high tenor voice. "Out of my way!" He ran with his left arm crooked and his left wrist dangling, but his right hand fumbled in his pocket and came out with a gun.

The muzzle jerked up and flamed. Carl threw himself against a stool. A current of air fanned his cheek and the vicious whine of a bullet sang in his ears and seemed to linger long after the shattering blast of the shot.

Carl rose to his knees. Through the

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open doorway he glimpsed the little man, standing on the runningboard and flourishing the revolver. Carl flung himself out of sight and stayed there, on the floor, until he heard the whine of gears and the screech of rubber tires. Then he stood up and saw his car sweep to the highway and race back toward town.

He looked at Aaron. "You all right?"

Aaron nodded. "Sure. He didn't shoot at me. Who was it? The stumblebum, huh?"

"And how." Carl whirled and yelled at the proprietor. "Where's your phone? Quick!"

The proprietor stared. "Phone?" he repeated stupidly. "Phone?"

Carl reached across the counter and shook him. "Where in hell is it? Geez — can't you talk?"

"Phone?" the big face repeated again. "Phone? No phone here. No phone —"

"Come on," said Carl. "Let's get out of here."

The ugly whine of the bullet and the thunder of the report were still echoing in his ears. His body felt light and tight. He could move fast, but not slowly. He ran out of the diner. He kept feeling the funnel of air slapping his cheek. Later on he'd realize how close that bullet had come, but right now nothing was real. There was just the lightness of his body and the need to reach the road and get a hitch. He waved his arms and began swearing as the first car tore by.

Fifteen minutes later Carl and Aaron tumbled out of a small truck and raced for the telephone at the service station. Carl rammed in his nickel and asked for police headquarters. The police operator switched him to Crowder's office.

"Hello?" came Crowder's dry, business-like voice.

"Wayward speaking. I'm out on U.S. 90. Bettner and I just found this man we want, but he shot his way out and headed back to town. In my car."

"What am I supposed to do?" grumbled Crowder. "Buy you a new car?"

"I tell you, he shot at me! Missed me by inches, and broke loose and took my car. Good Lord — get busy on it! New York plates, two-C-six-five-o-three."

"Two-C-six-five-o-three," repeated Crowder. "Property of Carl Wayward. And now tell me this. Why the hell did you have to go and mess things up when I had a highway detail stopping everything that came along, huh?"

"After White's performance," snapped Carl, "I wasn't expecting much."

"What you expect — we got the whole department built around that. We been spending years just waiting for you to come along. Holy hell! What did I ever do to deserve this?"

Carl felt himself beginning to go, but he forced himself to speak slowly. He bit off the end of every word. "I could answer that one," he said, "but you'd probably get me for slander."

Abruptly he slammed the receiver. His head was dizzy and the room swayed. When he clenched his teeth, the plaster walls steadied for a moment and then began rocking again. He saw a chair and he aimed for it, but the floor shimmied. Then Aaron had him by the arm and was helping him sit down.

"I'm okay," said Carl. "Let me rest a minute."

Aaron's dark eyes gazed dreamily. They were sympathetic and steady and curiously dilated. They seemed to grow into a pair of dark disks, like two

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enormous gun muzzles aimed at Carl's head.

"Just the reaction," said Aaron tranquilly. "Nothing to worry about."

Carl nodded. "Yes. The reaction. Listen, Aaron." He rubbed his forehead and his fingers dripped with moisture. "About that shot, Aaron. Just don't mention it, will you? Gabrielle — she might be worried about it."

Aaron stared silently. His expression was sad, yearning, and yet there was something queer about him. Envy, regret. Revolver muzzles. A strange jumble that Carl couldn't quite understand.

Then it passed off and Carl stood up. "Come on," he said.

He grinned and Aaron smiled back. Aaron was just a slim, wiry man, normal and sympathetic, with dark, intelligent eyes.

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8: THE DOG-HOUSE

WHEN CARL AND AARON reached the hotel, the Battle of the Keyser Suite was in full swing. Aaron muttered under his breath, "He's at it," and Carl heard Masterson's crisp voice bite through the paneling of the door.

"The biggest official in Washington wouldn't speak to me like that," he snapped. "The head of the Priorities Board — the President of the United States wouldn't dare do it!"

"You didn't kill his mother," said Sonny.

Aaron's fist banged on the door and punched it open.

Masterson was striding up and down between the couch and the fireplace. His appearance was still impeccable. His thin gray hair had the same neat part, his suit held its tailor-shop crease and his tie retained its majestic folds. But the lines of his face had deepened and given him a worn, scarred surface, like arroyos carved on the face of a too arid mountain. His greenish eyes flashed with the cold dazzle of a gem stone and his mouth was a straight, lipless line.

While he paraded across the room, Sonny and Sis held interior lines on the couch. Sis had tucked her legs underneath her dress and she was perched on the cushions like a visiting sprite fresh from another world. Sonny, short and squat and husky for his age, sat with his legs crossed and his hands clasped behind his head. He unclasped them suddenly to stuff back a giggle. He and Sis were playing up to each other so that later on they could gloat over the scene and repeat their best lines.

As for Gabrielle, she gave Carl the impression of a referee who had suspended all rules so that her favorite would be sure to win. But at sight of Carl, she had one of her rare attacks of conscience and she tried to gloss over the whole business. "After all," her look informed Carl, "what could I do?"

She attacked the situation with a smile and as many words as she could cram into the first few seconds. "Hello, I'm glad you finally came. We were having such a nice tea party. You'll join us, won't you? Carl, dear, phone down for tea for all of us. You'd better order a bottle of it, and soda on the side. Carl, where were you? You're Mr. Bettner, aren't you? I'm so glad to meet you. Carl never introduces anybody. Have you met the Keysers yet? Miss Keyser and Mr. Keyser."

Sonny didn't get up. Aaron stared at Sis and she smiled shyly and murmured, "You're going to stay in New Orleans, aren't you? Uncle Albert was saying so."

Masterson roared, "I've had enough of this. I'm sick of it. Aaron, you can make financial arrangements for these — these —"

Sis looked shocked and said, "Oh, Uncle Albert!"

Masterson went on grimly to Aaron. "See that they have funds to take care of them. Figure out what they need and make up a trust deed to cover it. I want to get them off my mind and never see them or hear of them as long

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as I live. From now on, they're disowned!"

Then the phone rang and Aaron picked it up. "Hello?" he said. "Who's calling? . . . He doesn't speak to people unless he knows who they are . . . I tell you — Yes, he's here." He held the instrument toward Masterson. "For you, AJ. Won't give any name, and insisted on talking to you. Better take it."

Masterson crossed the room briskly and grabbed at the phone. "Hello?" he said sharply. "Of course it is. You asked for me, didn't you? . . . Who? I don't talk to people unless —" He listened for a full half minute and then he frowned. When he spoke again, his voice was grave and the anger had gone out of it. "Yes," he said. "Yes . . . What's that? I don't understand." The receiver blurred faintly. Masterson burst out, "Why? What for? Who is this? Can't you —"

The receiver clicked sharply and he turned in bewilderment. He was holding the telephone as if he didn't know what to do with it. "They hung up," he said blankly.

"Who did?" asked Carl. "What was it about?"

Masterson replaced the phone thoughtfully, went to the easy chair and sat down. "Are those drinks coming?" he asked. "I think I could use one."

Carl asked for room service, but while he spoke he watched Masterson. The magnate stood up and paced the room. He picked a coin from his pocket and shook it, then tossed it, caressed it and shook it once more, as if it were a talisman that could answer any question he asked. A half dollar. One of the hundred million he commanded. He practically invoked its advice and apparently it performed, because he pocketed it abruptly and swung toward Sonny and Sis.

"You're leaving tonight," he said. "With me."

"We'd rather stay," said Sonny.

"Much rather," added Sis. She glanced at Aaron and her eyes sought his approval.

Masterson said coldly, "This time I'm not asking; I'm ordering."

"Dictatorship," remarked Sonny.

"You have no right!" exclaimed Sis.

Masterson changed his tactics and tried to load his voice with kindness. "I have every right. And remember that even if we have occasional differences, I still have your best interests at heart."

"You have no heart," said Sonny obstinately.

"It wouldn't work," said Sis. "You know we never get along."

"You corrupt us."

"With wealth," murmured Sis.

"Perhaps," remarked Masterson, "I'd better tell you what that phone call was."

"We wouldn't believe you," said Sonny. "You always put things over on M'ma and you'll try the same thing with us."

"Like the time you cabled us to come home from Europe."

"And made trans-Atlantic phone calls."

"And threatened to cancel our letter of credit."

"And told M'ma she was ruined."

"Financially," explained Sis quickly.

"And all you really wanted was to transfer some property to M'ma so you could save taxes."

"Somebody," said AJ somberly,

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"just threatened to kill you."

"With a gun?" demanded Sonny.

"Like M'ma?"

"In a courtyard?"

"At night? How romantic!"

"I love danger," said Sonny.

"Aaron!" snapped AJ. "Convince these little fools and see that they're on my plane tonight, nine o'clock. Somebody just told me the people who killed Milly were after her children, and for the same reasons. She said to get them out of town or they wouldn't be safe."

"*She* said?" asked Carl.

Masterson stopped in mid-stride. For a moment he seemed surprised, as if he'd let something slip that he hadn't intended to. Then he covered up aggressively. "You understand English," he snapped. "You heard what I said."

"Can you repeat her exact words?"

"Certainly. She said, 'Mr. Masterson, this is a friend and I want to warn you.' No, she didn't say warn. She just said they weren't safe."

"Who weren't safe?" asked Carl. "Did she call them by name?"

"Come to think of it, she did. Sonny and Sis. 'Sonny and Sis,' she said, 'are in danger of being killed if they stay here.' Something like that."

"Uncle Albert," said Sonny, "always did have a lousy memory."

"Except in business," added Sis.

"We never did get along."

"We'd rather be killed than corrupted!"

"Do you still want us?" asked Sonny.

"No!" stormed Masterson. "Get murdered and be damned to you! Like your mother! How a sister of mine ever spawned such a pair of brats is beyond me. Stay here and be damned!" He stormed from the room and slammed out to the corridor.

Sonny began laughing. "Now we can stay and have fun. Let's all get cock-eyed."

Sis put her hand on his shoulder. "Stop joking," she said. "Please. And all of you — don't mind us. Uncle Albert doesn't really care about us or M'ma. He just wants to avoid scandal. I told you — you should have kept him away. You see, he might kill us." She spoke casually, as if she'd commented on the color of his tie or his preference for coffee with chicory. She seemed unaware that she'd said anything unusual. She glanced around the room seeking to know why everyone had gone silent. Then her eyes met Aaron's, and locked. She turned away and blushed a deep crimson.

Gabrielle said, "Carl, why don't you and Aaron go downstairs? They have the loveliest bar, just for people like you."

Sonny made signals that neither Carl nor Aaron acknowledged. Then the boy said, "Maybe I'll have a beer, too." He crossed the room and whispered to Carl, "Sis goes soft. She's all right for a while, and then whoops! She goes soft."

"You'd better stay here," said Carl. "Aaron and I want to talk."

"You two talk, and I'm the one who's in danger," declared Sonny. "That's good. Well, I'll get a gun while you're talking. Crowder'll let me have a license. He's a friend of mine."

"No gun, Sonny," said Carl. "They're dangerous."

"I know how to handle one. A fellow in Italy showed me, once."

"Did he tell you whom to shoot, too?"

"Sure. Mussolini!"

"You should have followed his ad-

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vice long ago, but it's too late now. Better stay, Sonny."

Aaron didn't speak until he and Carl were seated at a table in the bar. Then he said, "Carl, the little man yelled when he started to run out of the restaurant. Remember?"

"Sure. What of it?"

"His voice," said Aaron. "Sort of high-pitched and womanish."

"Well?"

"So was the voice on the telephone."

Carl picked up his drink. Last night the bum had been panic-stricken and had rushed wildly into the night. He'd had no thought of shooting and he hadn't even known there was a gun within reach. Today he was prosperous and armed; he'd tried to kill Carl and he'd threatened the lives of Sonny and Sis. Instead of an ineffectual little figure trapped in a narrow corridor, he had become sinister. Why? Why the change?

The answer was plain enough. Somebody was coaching the little man. The somebody who had removed the gun from the pushcart during those few seconds that Carl had run out to the street. There had to be someone else.

And yet, the chief danger came from the little bum. Thus far, he was the active force. And Carl had the uncomfortable premonition that the force would act on him. He was the only one who could place the bum at the scene of the crime. Eliminate Carl, and the killer was comparatively safe. Even with the meager facts at hand, Carl could figure that out.

He looked up. Aaron was studying him with a strangely intense concentration, as if Aaron were trying to make up his mind about some important question.

He decided suddenly. "Carl," he said quietly, "you're a good guy, but a little innocent. You asked AJ why he hired you, and he gave half the answer. I'll give you the other half. He's buying your honesty."

"I thought it was an unpurchasable commodity. I thought what people bought was dishonesty."

"You don't get it. You see, nobody knows where this case is going. There may be nothing much in it, and there may be dynamite. Let's say you find out that Milly was a Nazi agent, for instance. Something lurid and dirty. You won't tell Crowder about it. That's the point. But you might hand over your information to some responsible parties." Aaron sipped his drink and studied Carl with dark, dreamy eyes. "Then my job is to tell you to shut up, or else."

"Or else what?"

"Don't be childish."

"Hell — am I supposed to be scared of the dark? Talk facts and tell me what you mean. Or else what?"

Aaron leaned back and signaled the waiter for another drink. "Any time you don't play ball, I do two things. I tell the papers you're a well known Communist, and I tell Crowder to do his stuff. You get arrested on some flimsy charge or other. Somebody picks a fight and you're held for disturbing the peace, or maybe you're just arrested for being able to read a book. Crowder's had experience at it. You're held for a few days and then released — with a few broken bones or damaged kidneys or internal injuries. Anyhow, you spend the next few weeks in a hospital. They know how to do it down here.

"I'll tell you about a friend of mine.

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Ken Lawson. He happened to be going through New Orleans in the summer of '38, when there was a strike on. He got into conversation with somebody on the street and mentioned the fact that he was thinking of doing an article on the labor situation. The guy was a plain-clothes cop and Ken was hauled off to jail. They charged him with loitering and with being a fugitive from Texas and with being a prominent Communist. The newspapers had different versions, depending on whom they happened to speak to. They fingerprinted him and refused to let him have a lawyer and threatened to beat the hell out of him. He was practically eaten alive with bugs, he didn't sleep all night and he came out a nervous wreck. Some newspaper friend finally heard about it and got him out. Ken's hand still shakes when he talks about it."

"So? What do you want me to do? Develop palsy and give the five thousand dollars back?"

Aaron shook his head. "Once you're in these things, you don't crawl out. People like us, Carl — we're intelligent. That's about all we have in the world. A brain that's sharp enough to rustle up food to eat and leather to walk on. We're not Clark Gables to look at and we're not built like Dempseys and we're not as famous as Einstein, but we get along. We get good women, and we keep them. And only because we have sense enough not to batter out our brains against stone walls. We don't like everything we see, but we accept what we know we can't change. You're not a charter member, like me, but you're qualified to join the ranks of the disillusioned. You got fired for having liberal ideas. Ideas are all right to brag about in front of your wife, but it's indecent to expose them in public. If not plain stupid. There's your wife now. Let's talk about azaleas."

Carl glanced behind him and watched Gabrielle enter the bar. He had never tried to put her into words and he never would. He knew only that his pulse beat faster at sight of her, and that with the excitement and pride came a sense of deep, sure friendship.

She sat down in the empty chair. "I'll have a julep, thanks," she said. "I've made up my mind to keep trying until I find a good one, if I have to go all the way to Kentucky and vamp a colonel. What were you talking about?"

"Realism," said Carl. "Aaron thinks he's a realist. He works for a man named Masterson and he's seen so much dirty work that he doesn't believe in anything clean. Show him how wrong he is. Show him your ears, Bree."

She smiled and put her handbag on the table and said something about Sis, but Carl heard only the first words. He grabbed the pocketbook and exclaimed, "Bree — this is Milly's!"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Carl. I took it out of the sandbox this morning. I was afraid the janitor would change his sand, and the safest way seemed to be taking off the initials and carrying it about."

"Of all the hare-brained stunts you ever pulled," said Carl angrily, "this is number A-1 de luxe."

"Darling, that's a wonderful compliment, because if I hadn't taken it, somebody else would have. It was sticking out of the sand when I saw it. Maybe a child had been playing mud-pies or maybe somebody'd knocked it over by mistake or else the sand had simply

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begun to evaporate from natural causes. I never was much good at mechanics, but —"

Carl touched her hand and murmured, "Well, you have it." She smiled and her look suffused him like the invisible rays of ultra-violet.

"I came down chiefly to tell you about it. This is the first chance I've had. Put your hands in and feel where the lining's ripped. We overlooked that last night."

"Let me feel, too," said Aaron.

Carl handed him the dead woman's pocketbook. Aaron held it in his lap, below the table level. Carl turned back to Gabrielle. "Well?"

"Her datebook had slipped in there," said Bree. "I had the pocketbook with me when I went down to see Sis this morning, and I showed it to her. She went for the datebook right away and practically tore it out of my hands. She was wild and almost hysterical, and she ran into the bathroom and locked the door. She claimed she threw the little book out of the window, but she didn't. She tore out the pages and flushed everything down the toilet. The cover wouldn't go down, though. That's how I know."

Aaron replaced the bag on the table. "Then you didn't see what was in it?" he asked.

"Of course I did," said Gabrielle. "I looked before I showed it to her. Milly didn't have any dates Saturday. But Sunday, the day she was killed, she saw Walter Pritchard, the dentist, and then — and this is peculiar — tomorrow, Tuesday, she was going somewhere with her friend Mrs. Poldi Huntington, and Jeremy."

"Jeremy," said Carl. "Who's he?"

The waiter brought drinks and Gabrielle slipped her straw in the julep. She imbibed slowly, narrowed her eyes and then put the glass down. "It's lousy," she said. "They always are."

Carl and Aaron looked at her.

"Jeremy Keyser was Milly's husband," she said. "But the funny part of it is that he's been dead for ten whole years."

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9: FOR FUN AND FOLLY

BEFORE GOING TO BED that night, Carl had a long telephone conversation with Crowder. The superintendent had been working on the Keyser list of names and the most important news was that Dr. Walter Pritchard had suddenly and oddly skipped town.

"This afternoon, right before I tried to get him," said Crowder. "But I got a line on him. He's the brooding kind. Everybody says the same thing about him. Always looks as if he was going to bust down and cry. And he was in love with the Keyser dame and she wouldn't have him.

"Well, the way I figure it, he sees her Sunday afternoon and she turns him down again. They argue, they both get upset, and he decides to finish her off. He makes that appointment in the courtyard. He either sends the little bum in to see if the coast is clear, or else the guy's there all the time. When she walks in, he lets her have it. He runs out one way, and the bum starts the other way and meets you. See? You follow?

"You didn't follow the bum after he got away, but here's the way I dope it out. He runs into Pritchard, and Pritchard pays off for the bum to beat it. Figures we'll go after the bum and not bother with Pritchard or anybody else. That's why Pritchard waits till today before he lams it. He waits almost twenty-four hours. Maybe he's looking at the papers to see if the bum gets caught. Maybe the bum calls up and says he can't get out of town. After you and Bettner stopped him, see? So Pritchard gets scared right around then, in the middle of the afternoon, and he takes a powder. How does that hit you?"

"Logical enough, except for the fact that Pritchard couldn't get out of the courtyard. The door at the truck entrance was bolted from the inside. Still — how about the rest of Milly's friends?"

"They all got good alibis except the Huntingtons. Them two. Holy, suffering hell! I never want to meet another woman like that!"

"What happened?"

"Nothing," snapped Crowder. "Not a damn thing happened. That woman's crazy. She —" he broke off suddenly. When he resumed speaking, his voice was almost sly. "Why don't you drop in on 'em, Wayward? They're just about your type."

Carl asked Sis about them early the following morning. "Ollie paints and doesn't make money," she said, "and Poldi sells dresses and does. They're awfully nice, but for some reason M'ma wouldn't take us there. They have plenty of room, and M'ma was very mysterious about why we had to go to a hotel." Sis's eyes moistened, as they often did when she spoke of M'ma. "She seemed to think they would be a bad influence on us. Perhaps Poldi beats him. But I'm fond of Poldi. You won't make trouble for her, will you?"

"Of course not," said Carl.

Nevertheless, as he approached the Huntington address about ten o'clock in the morning, his first thought was

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that Milly had been killed exactly three blocks away.

The old brick house on Royal Street, where the Huntingtons lived, wore its balcony like a grandmother sporting her hoop-skirts. It was quaint and it dated the building, and guides pointed it out and said, "Excellent example of wrought iron grillwork. Note lacy effect and cotton-boll motif." But trolley cars and dust, with a generous portion of soft coal particles, had made the balcony less than pleasurable, and people like the Huntingtons chose the rear apartments, the former slave quarters at the back of the inner courtyard.

Carl rang the street bell and waited for the buzzer to release the door. He crossed a courtyard with a few banana trees that barely had the vitality to squeeze out their dwarfed, inedible fruit. A thick vine plastered one wall and a row of flower pots brought a touch of green to the feet of a stone lady who, with no clothes and no expression, was trying to pour water from an empty jug into a large cracked basin.

A door clapped open and a voice called out. "You rang? Huntington? Who is it?"

Poldi was as blond as a haystack, and built along the same lines. She had long ago relinquished her girth-right as a woman and decided to spread comfortably and batter people down instead of seducing them. She wore a garment that might have been a smock and might have been a shower curtain. Later on, when Carl got to know her, he learnt that when the doorbell rang and she wasn't dressed, she simply grabbed the handiest thing and draped it around her. If she could find anything large enough.

He came forward and said, "I'm Carl Wayward. You may have heard of me."

Poldi shouted, "Of course. Sis told me all about you. She said I should give her a good character, and I said if you hadn't learnt that much about her already, I'd use my pruning knife and when you went out of here you'd be something less than a man. Don't mind me. I'm noisy, but I'm nice. Come on in." She roared with robust good humor. It was evident that Poldi had grown fat on laughter.

She cannonaded Carl into a living room with bright red walls that made him blink. A tall thin shape in black, with a white face and coal black eyes loomed across his vision. With a start, he recognized the woman in slacks who had had a drink at the bar of The Den. But, if she had noticed him last night, she gave no sign of it now. Her dark, inscrutable eyes appraised him and made their private judgment. He had no idea what she was thinking. And he wondered.

Meanwhile, Poldi introduced her and chattered on. "Miss Linda Trevis, this is Carl Wayward. He's doing something or other on that case I was telling you about. I don't know how he got mixed up in it or what he is or why he can't let the police handle it, but there he is, anyhow. Crowder had me in his office all yesterday afternoon and kept firing questions until I got sick and tired. I invited him to finish up here, where I could sit in a comfortable chair and not have the light in my eyes, and I went around to Jake's and got knock-out drops, and so help me, if Crowder comes here and bothers me, I'm going to give him dope in his drink and send him home in an ambulance. The man

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annoys me. I told him I pay taxes so that when my best friend gets murdered, the police will use elementary intelligence and question the people who didn't like her instead of the ones who did. But not Crowder. He didn't feel like leaving his office and so he hauled all Milly's friends down to headquarters and made insulting remarks. I called him a fat slob and dared him to call me the same, and by jingo! he was so surprised he just sat there and stared."

"He was probably out of breath from listening," said Carl. "Like me. You get me all worn out."

"I told *you* what to worry about," she roared. "Oh, Linda. We didn't finish up. I'll have that tomorrow afternoon. It'll knock 'em dead — wait till you see. Good-by, darling, and tell that slave-driver you work for that you won't go on without another raise. I know that joint of his. Nobody in town would spend a nickel there if it weren't for you, and it's time you told him. And if you want me to do it, I'll be glad to. I'd like to meet him, anyhow."

She smacked the tall, pale woman on the lips, sprinkled her with endearments and surplus energy and kicked her out into the courtyard. Then she turned back to Carl.

"I sell dresses. The latest and most expensive, and Seventh Avenue's chicest, and Linda dances at a night club and Ollie designs her costumes. Her new one's a knockout, too. Let's all have a party and go to the opening. Ollie's about due, anyhow. With a murder practically in the family, he's entitled to one extra drunk. I can't trust that little squirt, and I'm mad. Hear Sonny and Sis are stopping at a hotel and they ought to be here, but if they were, Ollie would get fried and I'd get fried along with him, and that would be a bad example for the children. It's a shame, too, because outside of being a booze-hound and never earning a cent of money, Ollie's a damn swell guy. What did you want? The chance to talk or something?"

"Can it be done?"

"Don't mind me. I told you I was noisy, but I shut up when you tell me to. Ollie throws dishes when I talk too much, but I wouldn't advise you to try."

Carl grinned. "Sweetheart," he said, "I think you and I are going to understand each other, just as soon as we do a little explaining. I'm told you were Milly's best friend, and I know Sis has a soft spot for you. I was hired by Masterson, but my affections are with Sis."

"All I want," said Poldi feelingly, "is to have someone show me who killed Milly. Just point a finger, and I'll do the neatest massacre you ever saw."

"Then tell me how you happened to have a date today with Milly and Jeremy. And who Jeremy is."

"Jeremy Keyser, her husband."

"Where can I find him?"

"Just across the state line, in Mississippi."

"Know his address?"

"Yes. Third row, next to the last grave. Just ask for the cemetery. He's been there the last ten years and it's unlikely that he moved."

"I thought we were going to be straight on this. Milly had a date marked down for today with you and Jeremy, and you don't usually write down a date with a tombstone."

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"I don't know what you usually do and I have no idea what Milly wrote in her book, but this is the anniversary of Jeremy's death and we were going to drive out there to put flowers on the grave. She came south every year at this time to commemorate his death. In the afternoon we decorate his tombstone and in the evening we get drunk. It was a ritual, and between you and me, it was more fun than Mardi Gras. Come along, if you like. The flowers are all ordered, and I hate driving alone."

"I think I will," said Carl. "But if Milly was so fond of Jeremy, why did she bring up her children to call him a stinker?"

"Why not?" asked Poldi. "It's like Ollie and me. Just because I bat him around once in a while doesn't mean I don't love him."

"You may have your own sweet way of showing affection, but Milly struck me as being more conventional."

Poldi's huge body sighed impatiently. "Look, Pussycat. I thought you and I were going to get along, and now you start arguing with me. I don't care whether it sounds crazy or not, but I'm telling you facts. Milly was mad about that guy. There was only one Jeremy in her life, and corpse or not, she still loved him. Now don't get me worked up. I have to change my dress and get the car, and you can ask me questions all the way from here to Mississippi. Which is a hell of a lot more than I'd do for most people." She rose and waddled towards the stairs. "You can play the radio or read books or have a drink, or go out in the garden and look for the place where Ollie raped the statue with a monkey-wrench last fall. In other words, amuse yourself and do anything you want."

"I'd like to meet your husband."

Poldi swung around. "Oh, no you don't. You want to ask questions, and if Ollie ever got mixed up in a murder case, he'd go on a three months drunk. I'd rather they convicted him, because at least he'd stay sober. Besides, it would give me a lot of publicity and I'd get marriage proposals and he wouldn't take me for granted any more. But they can't convict him, because we were home playing bezique that evening. You could cross-question Ollie and get him all upset and he'd go out and get boiled. Then you could question him all over again and you'd end up at the beginning. We played bezique."

While she spoke, a mild, light-haired man came slowly down the steps from the upper floor. He stepped softly, and his lips were moving in speech. He was almost as tall as Poldi, and next to most people he would have seemed at least average in size. But Poldi dwarfed him as completely as her blast drowned out his voice.

When she stopped bellowing, his words became audible. "I heard you talking," he said, in a low-pitched, halting tone. "I thought I'd entertain you while Poldi gets dressed. You'll want to find out whether she told you the truth. As it happens, she did."

Poldi roared, "You rat!" and swept up the stairs.

Ollie smiled feebly. "I was at my listening pole," he said. "That pipe in the corner. It acts as a kind of sounding board and I can hear everything that's said down here. I thought of putting in a dictaphone, once, because Poldi's amusing and I like to hear what she

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says. But she would only have ripped it out. She's a remarkable woman — if you're not married to her.

"I'm going to Jeremy's grave with her. That's straight stuff, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Poldi can be honest when she tries, though usually she prefers lying. She seems to have told you the truth this morning, which is more than she did for Crowder. But she likes you and you'd better accept her as she is. She's a force of nature, Wayward. Too much maternal instinct. Not that she doesn't mean well. But she mothers me as if she were a brood-hen and I were an egg. Still —" he sighed dispiritedly. "Come on up to the studio," he suggested. "We'll wait there and I'll show you some of my stuff."

Carl's first reaction to Ollie's painting was that, as an artist, Ollie stood solidly on his own feet. His work was broad in scope and intelligent in execution. It ranged from bright, vigorous canvases that teemed with color and exploded with energy to abstractions and quiet, dreamy monotones, subtle or somber or delicate. But all of them had something to say.

Carl glanced at a portrait that stood on an easel placed prominently near the window. The subject was a serious, owlish man with round, cushiony little cheeks and overlarge brown eyes. The gray hair seemed misplaced, as if Ollie had painted the man in a toupee.

"Who's he?" asked Carl.

"Oh, that." Ollie took the canvas from the easel. "Just a chore. I'll show you some stuff that might be more interesting."

Ollie replaced the owlish man's likeness with a rough sketch of Sis, and then produced a series of portraits of Poldi. "The Seven Plagues of Egypt," he remarked. "I'm saving them for an exhibit."

Downstairs the phone began to ring. A slow rich voice answered it lazily. "Hello? . . . Nobody here by that name. This Mis' Huntington's house . . . Oh, yes'm. I'll see." Then the voice sang out, "Somebody asking for Mist' Wayward."

Carl called, "That's me" and went downstairs. A broad, chocolate woman with enormous feet and wide, droopy hands proffered him the phone.

Gabrielle said, "Carl? . . . Oh, Carl — I'm so upset. Somebody just phoned and left a message. They sort of whispered it and I don't even know whether it was a man or a woman. But whoever it was warned you not to go anywhere with Poldi. They said it was dangerous and you might get killed. You won't go, will you?"

"Why not? Somebody says boo, and what am I supposed to do? Shudder with fright?"

"Carl, you can't go — I couldn't stand it — I'd simply die of worry — I'd —"

"Bree, talk sense! Nobody knows where I'm going except Poldi and me. The whole thing's an asinine joke of hers and you make the mistake of falling for it."

"You're just saying things, Carl. Why would she do that?"

"Because she's screwy, like you. I tell you, nobody else knows I'm going, so who else could it be?"

"I don't know, Carl. I wish I could believe you."

"Bree darling, you know damn well I don't go out and get killed, so calm down and forget about it and I'll see you at dinner. And I'll take care of myself, for your sake as well as my own.

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Because I love both of us."

Thoughtfully, he replaced the phone. At least he'd convinced Bree, which solved the most immediate problem. And possibly all problems, too. Either Poldi had made the call, or else someone was following Carl with an efficiency that was practically lethal.

Lethal. That was an unfortunate word.

Then Ollie's voice came from the top of the stairs. He was holding a whisky bottle in his hand and he seemed more interested in the bottle than in Carl. Nevertheless, he had evidently overheard the conversation and he disposed of it with finality.

"Disregard it," he said flatly. "Supposing you do get killed — so what? Disregard it."

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10: A LITTLE GHOULISH GLEE

CARL WAITED in the living room with the bright red walls and gave only half his attention to Ollie's advice on how to treat worrying wives. Disregard them. The refrain was his solution to everything bothersome. If somebody wants to kill you, control your emotions. Disregard them.

Maybe the Huntingtons were just wacky. Maybe Ollie really believed that it didn't matter whether you were killed. Maybe Poldi, who was ready to give knock-out drops to the Chief of Police and send him home in an ambulance — maybe she was capable of delivering an anonymous warning just for the fun of it. And certainly the logic which had convinced Bree proved that no one but Poldi could have made the phone call.

Nevertheless, Carl was far from believing. The chief question in his mind was whether the message was a threat or an attempt to protect him. And fundamentally, it didn't matter which. The point was why anyone should bother to warn him. And who.

When Poldi returned, Ollie stuffed his bottle behind a cushion of the couch and contrived to look innocent. Carl rose and said casually, "Where were you?"

Poldi banged a bundle on the table. "At the florist's," she said. "And the grocer's."

"See anyone?"

"Of course not. Why do you ask?"

Carl shrugged. "You took so long, and I was anxious to get started."

"Well, come on then. We have a long trip." She went briskly out of the room.

He followed her to a five-year-old sedan with shredded fenders held together with metal braces and a couple of rivets. The trunk was sprung and didn't close tightly. Carl glanced at the rear seat, piled high with flowers, and remarked that the only thing missing was a hearse to lead the way.

Poldi smiled with pleasure. "Milly ordered the flowers ahead of time," she said. "She never spared expense. And seeing as how the poor guy is going to be neglected for the rest of his death, I bought a couple of extra wreaths. They were a bargain, anyhow, left over from a funeral somebody didn't want. You can't even see that they're faded unless you look close." She turned around to admire them, and Carl clutched at the wheel.

Poldi apparently handled a car the way she did everything else. In the grand manner, and without stint. When she drove, she used up the whole road.

"Why don't you let me drive?" asked Carl. "Then we'd be sure of getting there."

"Don't worry, Pussycat. I've never had a real accident yet. Besides, people always blow their horns before you hit them."

"What do you call a real accident?" asked Carl.

"When you get killed, like Jeremy. And even then, some people don't believe it."

Carl glanced at her sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't Sis tell you the story of how

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Milly refused to believe Jeremy was dead, and kept on hoping? These celebrations we had weren't really wakes. Milly half-expected he'd walk in on them, and whenever she got drunk — oh, well! She just wasn't used to liquor."

"You'd better start at the beginning," said Carl. "I never heard of Jeremy until last night, and I've hardly spoken to Sis since."

Poldi slowed up to pass the police cordon that still blocked the highway. Beyond, the road dipped and sagged on its marshy foundation. There were no hills and no houses. Nothing but yellow marsh grass, an occasional cabin and a few bridges where canals cut through the swamp. Poldi wandered absently from one side of the road to the other, but since she could see every car a full mile away, the technique involved only minor hazards.

"The beginning?" she said. "I guess you could begin with Masterson, since he really broke up the marriage. The trouble with Jeremy was that he was never a money-maker. For Masterson's brother-in-law, that doesn't sound serious, but it was. Masterson flaunted his own wealth, and Jeremy brooded and lost his self-respect. The bust-up was inevitable. Milly was left with a boy of about a year and a girl of three, and an income from brother Albert.

"No man ought to know how a woman feels when she loses her husband, and Milly took it considerably worse than she should have. When she didn't get mended in a year or two, I wrote Jeremy — though I'd never met him — and told him he was a goddamn fool and he'd better come back to Milly or I'd go out to California and drag him back. He answered that he still loved Milly and that if she'd have him —"

"Listen," said Carl gently. "There's a truck coming. Let him have his half of the road."

Poldi swerved. "Thanks, Pussycat. I really wasn't noticing. I guess maybe that's how Jeremy was killed, though I never really asked."

"Never asked whom?"

"Wallie Pritchard. He was driving when it happened. I didn't see Jeremy when he came through New Orleans on his way north. Neither did Ollie. He thought we'd better not. He said I might lose my temper and spoil it all. But anyhow, Pritchard was driving Jeremy to Florida. They blew a tire or something, and landed upside down and the gas tank exploded. Pritchard was thrown clear and somebody found him walking up and down the road in a dazed condition, but Jeremy was right in the middle of it. His body was so badly burnt you couldn't see a face. The wedding ring was found near the body and that's how the first identification was made. But Milly insisted the ring was too tight to come off unless the finger was severed. So she claimed the body couldn't be Jeremy's and she had it exhumed. The second and final identification was made by a dental chart."

"And the dentist?" asked Carl. But he knew the answer even before Poldi gave it.

"Pritchard," she said. "Funny the way he disappeared, isn't it?"

"What did you think about Jeremy? Did you agree with Milly?"

"I always believe what I want to believe, and if Jeremy wasn't killed, he should have been. It never would have worked out, even if he had gone back to Milly. He was a badly licked

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man, and once a man is licked, you may as well throw him out."

"Did it ever occur to you," said Carl, "that Jeremy was still alive and Milly had actually seen him? And that that was why she wrote down the date? I still can't figure her writing down an appointment with a tombstone."

"Nonsense!" said Poldi. "Of course Jeremy's dead." And that settled it.

The cemetery was a small, raised clearing near the road. Behind and on either side, shaggy, long-needled pines grew from the arid soil. A small fence enclosed the graves. One or two of them were marred with the skeletons of dead flowers, but most of the patch was given over to weeds.

Poldi stopped the car. "It's not a bad place," she said. "If you die in New Orleans, they put you above ground in tombs because if they dropped you in a hole you'd splash. And in the high-hat cemeteries, they drag lawn-mowers over your body every spring. I'd like this place. When I die, I want to be buried here. I'll bet it's cheap, too."

"Don't be so practical," said Carl, climbing out of the car. "Makes me morbid."

He noticed that Poldi left the key in the ignition. She said, "Stand there and I'll load you up with flowers." She draped the wreaths over his head and filled his arms.

"I can't see a damn thing, Poldi."

"I'll lead you. We'll make a much more touching procession that way. Ready?"

He could see dimly, and his feet sank in the dry sand as she guided him through the gate. She began talking in a loud voice.

"I suppose there must have been a house near here once, because people don't usually cart their dead out to a dump heap a few miles from town. Still, you'd think —"

"What's that?" demanded Carl. He turned around as he heard a starter whir. The flowers obstructed his vision and he dropped the ones in his arms and tore the wreath from his head. A piece of wire scratched his neck and Poldi grabbed the circle of flowers and got in his way. He tore loose and ducked out of his halter.

The car was moving now. A little man was bent over the wheel. He turned and waved at Carl, and Carl seemed to hear him chuckle as the motor raced. It was only an impression, of course, but there was no doubt of the identity of the man at the wheel.

He was the little stumble-bum.

Carl's first thought was that at least the little man hadn't shot at him. Then he grew aware of Poldi, sitting on the ground and rocking with laughter. He snapped at her in cold fury.

"So that was it! You called Bree — wanted to scare me off so you could sneak the little gunman out of town. Well, you did it, but just think of the jam *you're* in!"

She let out another shriek of laughter. "You looked so funny fighting the flowers! If only you could have seen yourself!"

"Packed him in the trunk, didn't you? And when I didn't scare, you decided to bring me along anyhow. At least I'd help you get past the police."

"Don't get mad, Pussycat. It was all in a spirit of good, clean fun."

"Get up and come down to the road."

"And not put flowers on the grave?

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Don't tell me you forgot what we came for. Here — pull me up."

Carl reached out and tugged. For so much tonnage, she lifted surprisingly easily. When she stood up, her face was close to Carl and he examined the clear, forthright eyes, the strong cast of her features. She watched him in a silence that was almost humble, and her mood became serious.

"I know it was a dirty trick," she said, "but I had to. Really I did." Then she frowned. "Tell me, what did you just say about my trying to scare you?"

"The phone call," said Carl impatiently. "The phone call to my wife warning me it was dangerous to come along."

"I didn't make any phone call," said Poldi. "Tell me about it."

"There's nothing to tell. Just the warning. And, since nobody else knew I expected to come along —"

"Somebody else did," said Poldi thoughtfully. "The little man. He was hiding in the garage and I told him to be extra careful because you'd be in the car. He didn't seem to like the idea. Then I went marketing and later I picked him up at the garage. He could have phoned in the meantime."

"But why? Is he so naïve that he thought I'd frighten off? Or was it the other way round, that he wanted to make sure I would come? And if so, again why?"

"I'm just a simple nit-wit," said Poldi, "and the little man merely wanted to get out of New Orleans. I don't follow these deep-laid plots."

Carl began to get it then. Nobody could have expected to make him stay home. But somebody might have wanted to arouse his suspicions and make him check on the Jeremy story.

"Come on," he said suddenly. "I want to see that grave." He grabbed the flowers and loaded his arms. Poldi followed slowly, directing him to one of the plots near the fence. When she said, "That one, there," he heaved the flowers and they dropped in an awkward heap, partially hiding the headstone. He craned his neck to read the inscription. "Jeremy Keyser, 1902–1931. Beloved husband of Millicent." Carl's idea had fizzled out.

He turned away and scanned the road. There was no traffic in sight, and a few minutes more or less wouldn't make much difference. With efficient police work, the little man ought to be in custody by nightfall.

Carl sighed and watched Poldi work over the grave. She straightened the wiring of the wreaths and arranged the flowers in an orderly pattern of color. She patted them expertly once or twice and then leaned forward to bury her nose in the blossoms. She seemed contented and thoroughly absorbed in her simple, manual task. If she was worried about the consequences of aiding a fugitive from justice, she didn't show it.

Poldi and the stumble-bum. It was a new and unexpected combination, and Carl wondered how Poldi would explain it. Certainly the stumble-bum was growing in importance. The first time, he'd been a scared little man fleeing into the night. The second time, he'd fired a gun and blasted his way loose. And now, he was becoming far more active. A phone call that frightened Gabrielle. An escape that showed daring and the ability to handle people.

In his new phase, he must realize that Carl was his chief source of danger. Carl could identify him, Carl could place him at the scene of the murder.

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He had good and sufficient reasons for threatening Carl. But was that the explanation of the phone call, or was he acting on the orders of someone else?

Presently Poldi grunted and stood up. "Even a heel," she remarked, "deserves some attention. Maybe Jeremy'll burn a little cooler for the flowers. Or moulder a little cleaner."

"Come on," said Carl. "We may as well start walking. Eventually we'll get either a hitch or a telephone."

Poldi followed him to the road. "Pussycat," she said quietly. "You're not really sore, are you?"

"Tell me about the bum. Why did you do it?"

"Simply because he was being hounded by the police. A poor little innocent like that! Why, the police would murder him if they ever got hold of him. They'd kill him if he was innocent, just so they could write *Solved* on a printed form somewhere."

"What makes you think he's innocent?"

"Just one look at the poor little thing. He was so scared and friendless. Now look, Pussycat — don't get me wrong."

"How did you find him?"

"He found me. He came to the door last night and — listen. If I tell you the truth, are you going to believe me? Because I could say I didn't even know he was in the car and you could never break me down, whereas the truth is so crazy I have to keep repeating it to believe it myself."

"Let's have the story. And better make it good."

"Well, he knocked on the door last night and asked whether Mr. Huntington was in. I told him Mr. Huntington was busy with his genius and couldn't be disturbed, and who was he and what did he want. And he said his name was Kelly."

"Kelly!" shouted Carl. "That little guy — a Kelly?"

"Now don't take it out on me. I never met him before and if I'd had anything to do with naming him I'd have made it something Greek. Like Acropolis or Terranova or —"

"Just stick to the story. A guy named Kelly."

"My feet hurt," said Poldi. "Let's sit down and rest."

"The hell with your feet. You can rest them all you want, once you're in jail."

Poldi burst out laughing. "You can't arrest me, and neither can anybody else because we're in Mississippi. Whatever I did was done in Louisiana and they'd have to extradite."

"I can do better than that. I can keep you out of Louisiana, for fear of arrest, while I go back and worry Ollie into that three-month drunk you're so scared of."

"And all on account of Kelly? He isn't worth it. The little sarsaparilla wanted a hundred dollars for not going to the police and saying he saw Ollie in the courtyard. That's the truth, Pussycat, and I told you you wouldn't believe it. Ollie and I were home all alone playing bezique the night Milly was killed, and that isn't a real alibi and so anybody can come along and blackmail us. I wouldn't mind if they made indecent proposals and tried to make love to me. That would at least be chivalrous, but all Kelly wanted was money, which I haven't got. So I told him I'd do the next best thing, and sneak him out of town."

"How did he catch on to that? Did

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he dream there were two people named Huntington and that they had no real alibi and lived on Royal Street?"

"I don't know. I told you the truth was crazy. What are you going to do about it?"

"Get a hitch back and then parole you to Ollie and hope you don't blow up the town to show your gratitude."

"Pussycat, I have nothing but the tenderest feelings for you."

"Sure, but before I'm through with you, your tender part is going to be your feet. All your life you're going to remember me as the guy who made you walk home."

Poldi heaved a deep sigh and fell into step, but a hundred yards farther on she stopped and let out a yell.

"What's the matter now?" asked Carl.

"Matter! Why, the greasy, two-timing little roach! The lowdown aphid! If I ever get hold of that earthworm, I'll break him in two!"

"What for?"

"The louse!" she fumed. "He stole my car!"

Carl grinned cheerfully. "That's nothing. Just remember that if you're unwilling to admit you helped him escape, you can't even report your theft to the police. Now will you be good?"

"The little cheat!" said Poldi grimly. "Just wait!"

A few minutes later, a big oil truck picked them up, and as soon as Poldi was comfortably seated, her high spirits returned and she made up to the truck-driver.

"Hercules," she said. "I want to drive."

"You couldn't manage this job, lady. You got to be used to it. You'd hit something, sure as hell."

"That's just what I want," said Poldi. "A big truck like this — I could smash into anything and not worry about getting hurt."

The truck driver laughed boisterously. He didn't dream that Poldi was serious.

As for Carl, he spoke little and thought much, and his mood was bitter and worried. Was he falling for an act and excusing Poldi simply because he liked her as a person? Was she one more link in the ring of steel that was being forged around him? White, Crowder, Masterson, Kelly. They were trying to use him and were prepared to wipe him out whenever it suited their convenience. Some day, something was likely to happen and then all of them would crack down. Carl didn't know what would bring it about. He was merely obsessed with the conviction that his days were numbered.

And Poldi, screeching ribald verses to a truck driver and the Louisiana swamps — where did she fit in? What made Carl trust her and why should he rely on his instincts? A female thunderbolt with a sense of humor. A monstrous carcass with a repressed husband and a strong, cheerful face. What was she really? What was her game?

The answers weren't easy to find, and Carl was still mulling them over when the truck rattled down the narrow cobblestones of Royal Street and stopped in front of the Huntington door. Poldi called a cheery, "Thanks, Hercules" and started to lower herself from the cab. Then she cried, "Look!"

Carl turned. The shabby car with the battered fenders was parked in front of the house. Kelly had doubled back and decided to stay in New Orleans.

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11: PORTRAIT IN DOUBLE-TALK

CARL MARCHED WEARILY into the hotel and went straight to the telephone operator. "Any messages?" he asked.

The girl turned and stared with eyes that had the shape and the intelligence of rather small saucers. "Oh, Mr. Man!" she exclaimed. "You frighten me!"

"You scare me, too. And my name's Wayward."

"I know it, Mr. Man. Just about everybody in this hotel knows it, and they sure admire you. I think it's wonderful."

"What?"

"About that newspaper write-up you had. But you're trying to kid me, and I don't know what-all to say. Really I don't."

"I'm just trying to get a message — if there is any."

"Your wife left word she was in the bar. She said something about juleps."

"I know the rest of that one," remarked Carl. "She said they were lousy." He turned and headed for the bar.

Gabrielle and Aaron were sitting at a corner table. Gabrielle, as always, was toying with her drink and decorating her particular corner of the world with an exotic freshness, whereas Aaron looked as if he'd been born and brought up in a barroom and was some kind of fixture that had to be stoked with scotch, regularly on the quarter hour.

"We'd better order a couple of rounds," said Carl. "I'm going to tell you a story, and you'll have to be drunk to believe it. I don't entirely believe it myself, except that it happened. I've been with Poldi all day long. She took me on a sleigh ride and we donated another car to the little stumble-bum. It's getting to be a habit, and I'm sort of ashamed to report my losses. Incidentally, his name's Kelly. So fix it firmly in mind before I start. Kelly. If you can believe that, maybe the rest of it will come easier. He's a little stumble-bum with a high-pitched, feminine voice and he slips through my hands with the greatest of ease. He's a disembodied spirit and he hits me with the jackpot every time I get even slightly close.

"It was a coffee cup last time, darling," said Gabrielle. "And you got scared and ran away from a man half your size. I don't see why the two of you didn't catch him."

Carl glanced at Aaron and Aaron gave a slight nod of understanding. Gabrielle didn't know anything about the gun.

"We were surprised," said Carl lamely. "We were too surprised to move."

"You're usually quick. I can't understand."

"Carl tripped," said Aaron. "And naturally, I didn't even recognize the man."

"It seems peculiar," said Gabrielle thoughtfully.

"If you'd stop harping on it and listen to me," said Carl irritably, "you'd learn something. You could afford to learn something."

"This Poldi," said Bree suddenly. "Is she attractive?"

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"She takes my breath away."

Gabrielle laughed icily. "I'd like to meet her. Do you still think she made that phone call? Is she dark or light, and how old is she? Why don't you tell the police?"

"Just try to listen," said Carl. "She told me Jeremy was on his way back to Milly ten years ago, that he was killed in an auto accident just over the Mississippi line, and that Milly never believed he was really dead and so she put flowers on his grave every year. And who do you think was driving the car?"

"Kelly," said Bree. "Kelly with a beard."

"Pritchard. What's the matter with the police that they can't locate a runaway dentist and a little man named Kelly?"

"But what happened?" asked Gabrielle.

"He tried to blackmail the Huntingtons, so Poldi packed him in her trunk and we all drove out to the cemetery. Then as soon as I'd stepped out and Poldi had hung me with funeral wreaths, Kelly got out of the trunk and drove off in the car. We had to get a hitch."

"And Poldi?" asked Gabrielle.

"She sang dirty songs with the truck driver, all the way home."

"Why didn't you arrest her?"

"Arrests are out of style. Nobody bothers seriously trying to arrest either Pritchard or Kelly. Why should I suddenly crack down on Poldi? Besides, I like her."

"I don't see the humor of it," said Aaron. "Occasionally I think of a phone call that threatened the lives of Sonny and Sis. Then I remember that I'm here chiefly to check up on you. You calmly tell me you helped sneak a murder suspect out of the jurisdiction and compounded the felony by not reporting it to the police. I think back and tell myself that you got into the case by withholding evidence. The pocketbook business. And finally, I tell myself that you're operating without a license."

"Aaron," said Bree. "If you pulled anything dirty on Carl, I'd kill you."

Carl nodded sagely. "She would. She loves to kill."

"You're getting paid ten thousand bucks," said Aaron dryly.

Carl turned.

"If you want the truth," said Carl, "I'm perfectly willing to admit I'm holding back. I'm protecting somebody, to the detriment of the case. Maybe I ought to tell you whom I'm protecting. Sis. If I put the screws on her, I think I'd learn a lot. But she'd suffer. Just think of what Crowder and White would do to her."

Aaron glared. Bree said quickly, "Carl's so gallant. He always protects ladies. First Sis and then Poldi, and he'd even protect me if he had to."

Carl didn't answer. Gabrielle was annoyed because he'd hit her jealous streak. That was fine. As long as she was annoyed she wouldn't worry about him. She wouldn't think about Kelly's sudden daring, or wonder why he'd returned to New Orleans. And what he was going to do next.

Aaron said abruptly, "I think I can guess how the bum got in touch with the Huntingtons."

"How?"

"That list of names. You showed it to me in the car yesterday, and it was still there when the car was returned. But he could have read it and then slipped it back in the seat. How was

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it headed? 'Suspects with alibis to check?' "

"Something like that. Or worse."

"Thoughtful of you," said Gabrielle coolly. "It must be your sporting blood."

"He made that phone call, too," said Carl.

Gabrielle burst out laughing. "And I was actually scared! From all you've told me, your little man is such a harmless creature."

"Quite," said Carl. "Let's go somewhere and eat."

But on the way to the dining room, Bree hung onto his arm and whispered, "Carl — I didn't mean it. Any of it. I don't know what made me nasty."

"You must have a guilty conscience about something. Give me time and I'll find out."

She squeezed his arm, and then he sighted Sonny and Sis at a corner table, engrossed in conversation with a man whose back was turned to Carl. For a moment, Carl didn't recognize Sis. She seemed much older, and a hairdresser had done something radical to her.

As Carl and Gabrielle and Aaron crossed the room, Sonny glanced up and then nudged Sis. She turned, and for a full second her eyes held a blank look, as if her attention was so deeply rooted that she couldn't react to the newer impression. Then recognition dawned, but instead of smiling, a look of intense fear swept her.

She rose, and by the time Carl had spoken, she had lost her terror and was trying to cover up. But she was still nervous and quivering within.

She said breathlessly, "Hello, all of you. We're just finishing dinner. I'm so excited. Did Bree tell you? This is Mr. Benning and he has a night club and he's giving me a job and I'm going to sing tonight. Isn't it wonderful? I've always wanted to. You have to come tonight and listen, all of you. Mr. Benning" — momentarily, her look of terror returned — "this is Mr. Wayward and Mr. Bettner. You met Mrs. Wayward before."

Then Carl looked at Benning for the first time. He was short. He had cheeks like little pin cushions, large, grave brown eyes, dark brown hair and the vague appearance of an owl. He was the man whose portrait Carl had seen in Ollie's studio.

Carl's hand dropped in surprise, and the name jogged something in his memory. Benning. Carl had heard it somewhere, recently. The portrait — the name —

Benning was frowning and Carl realized he'd deliberately refused to shake hands. Gabrielle said quickly, "Carl has lumbago of the arm. He can't lift it. I forgot to ask how it was today, Carl."

Carl flushed and felt angry at his own awkwardness. "It's better, thanks. Funny thing, Mr. Benning." Carl spoke incisively and secured an effect from his tone rather than from the content of his words. "I happened to see your portrait this morning." He paused, then added, "And your hair was gray."

Benning smiled slowly. "Then obviously you're mistaken. Because not only is my hair brown, but I've never had a portrait painted in my life."

"I'm not mistaken. And the painter is Oliver Huntington."

"Huntington? I never heard of him." Benning shrugged it off. "And if you ask him whether he knows me, I'm sure he'll say he doesn't."

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Carl started to apologize, but as he opened his mouth he noticed Sis and her look of terror. Words seemed to slide off his tongue without his having anything to do with them.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'll do just that."

Everyone except Benning was aware of the tension, but Benning smiled gently and seemed undisturbed. Irritably, Carl strode out of the dining room to the phone booths in the lobby.

Dialing the number, he was no longer sure. He had only glanced at the portrait, and the fact of the gray hair proved it wasn't Benning. Someone who resembled him closely, perhaps. Or else Ollie had wrought some queer change in the sketching. The possibility of Benning having a double was far more likely than that he'd lied. And yet, Carl had a strange feeling that he'd accidentally hit on something.

Then Ollie's voice answered and Carl said, "This is Wayward. I want to find out something about that portrait I saw this morning. Whose picture is it?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Talk sense, Ollie. You can't paint somebody you never saw."

"Why can't I?" demanded Ollie belligerently. "It's a free country, isn't it?"

"How in hell can you paint somebody you never saw?"

"That," said Ollie, "is my secret."

"Let's start all over again. I'm just asking a question and I'd like an answer."

"Well, I happen to specialize in painting the dead. People give me photographs of dead people and I do them in oil, suitable to hang over mantelpieces and develop into ancestors."

"This one isn't dead. His name's Arthur Benning and he's having dinner with Sonny and Sis."

"Benning!" exclaimed Ollie.

"Sure. Why? What about him? What's the matter?"

"He runs a night club. The Den. Place where Linda Trevis works, just a few blocks away. I never saw him, but she talks about him a lot. And listen to this.

"Somebody mailed me that photograph. No name and no nothing. They enclosed a twenty dollar bill and said they'd call for the picture in a few months and pay the balance. But the peculiar things was that the photograph was of a much younger man, and I was to paint him as he'd look fifteen years later."

So! That explained the gray hair. But — why? Why use an old photograph instead of a recent one? That sounded like somebody who hadn't seen him in many years. Linda Trevis hadn't sent the photograph, then.

Carl began to get all mixed up. "You say there was no signature to the letter? How about the postmark?"

"Haven't the least idea. It came long ago, and I'd almost forgotten. As a matter of fact, I lost the original picture and I'm finishing the thing from memory. What do you think of that?"

"Listen, Ollie — just hang onto the painting. I'd hate to have that walk off, too."

"Couldn't," said Ollie confidently. "I didn't paint any legs."

When Carl returned to the dining room, Sis and Sonny and Benning had already left. Aaron had a pair of scotches in front of him and Gabrielle was ordering dinner. She doubled the order and turned to Carl.

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"What was all that about?" she asked. "You were inexcusably rude."

"Somebody sent Ollie a photograph and asked him to paint it. Who is Benning, anyhow, and how did Sis meet him and why is he giving her a job?"

"It was sort of roundabout. Sis told Poldi she wanted to sing and Poldi told a dancer by the name of Linda Trevis and she told Benning."

"All the more strange. Why does Benning hire her? Here's a girl who's still an amateur, no experience and no training, and she may or may not have a good voice. But I certainly don't know whether she has, and I doubt whether anyone else does, either."

"Sis wanted to sing," said Bree spiritedly, "and I know what a lot of trouble I had getting into radio work, and as soon as I was getting places, somebody came along and married me out of them. I thought Sis would be better off starting young, and a night club is wonderful experience."

"Sounds fine for Sis," said Carl, "but it doesn't explain why Benning fell for the proposition."

"I gave him a couple of reasons," said Bree vaguely. "What's the difference?" She tasted her soup and said, "I don't see why Creole cooking is so famous, do you? All they do is play fast and loose with the pepper."

Aaron pointed to his scotch. "That's why I stick to this stuff. As for New Orleans cooking, they could fire the pepper down my throat with a shotgun. The result would be about the same."

"Not the sound effects," said Bree. "They're gentler, this way."

"About your reasons," said Carl.

"Oh, you know. I merely hinted that Sis was my protégée, and it was a good chance for him. I was terribly disappointed with the food at Michel's. I'd heard about it all my life, but it's just the high cost of pepper. Have you been there, Aaron?"

Aaron sipped. "I'm on Carl's side. I want to know how you managed Benning."

"You won't like it," said Bree. "Not a bit. Besides, it may bore you. All the things I said — I don't remember half of them."

Carl and Aaron collaborated on the perfect silence, and Gabrielle tried not to notice it. "You have to do all kinds of things in show business," she observed dreamily. "You can't just sit home and expect the managers to come around to you. You have to sell them something different, that nobody else has. So I pointed out that Sis was — well, you know. He wouldn't hire her if she was just one more singer who wanted a start."

Gabrielle smiled and tasted her steak with the hot Béarnaise sauce. "It's really quite good," she said.

Carl and Aaron stared fixedly while she cut her meat, transferred her fork to her right hand, raised it, bit into the steak with her shiny white teeth, wiped her mouth and pretended to enjoy the food. But the silent microscopy was too much even for her.

She sipped her water. "Really, you won't like it," she said. "I told him Sis's mother came from a prominent family and that she'd been murdered Sunday night and the papers hadn't printed the story yet. It seems cheap to capitalize on a thing like that, but after all, Sis has her career to think of."

"It's out," said Aaron. "You'd better tell her now."

"Oh, Aaron! Don't be such a puritan.

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I thought you admired the practical and — well if Benning wants to bill her tomorrow, in some sensational manner, it will be time enough to tell him. But let Sis have her chance tonight, won't you?"

"Bree," said Carl sternly. "Will you swear that Benning isn't pulling off any publicity tonight? Nothing about the murder or Milly or Masterson?"

"Now, Carl," she began, but he took her hand. She sighed and then she smiled and then she lowered her eyes and finally she gave up. "Nothing's being done tonight," she said. "Really. It's a sort of tryout. But for tomorrow — I had ideas that would have made history."

Carl nodded. "I'm sure of that. History written in blood."

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12: THE WINGS OF A POLLYWOG

BENNING HAD RESERVED a table at one end of the dim, cavernous room and he joined Sis's party soon after they were seated. Carl found himself next to the dark, chubby-cheeked night-club owner. Gabrielle had taken over Sonny for the evening, to distract him from what was happening to Sis, and as for Sis and Aaron, they were unaware whether they were in a tavern, a jail or their private palace. Nor did they seem to care.

Strange things were happening to Sis that night. She had grown quieter and more sure of herself. She was wearing her hair flat over her ears and pulled into a knot at the back, and she was experimenting with a trick of glancing aside and slightly raising her head, and smiling faintly the while, so that her profile and neckline showed to their best advantage. Carl wondered whether Gabrielle had taught her that, too, or whether it was a subordinate manifestation of the coiffure instinct.

But, though Carl had been impressed by Sis at dinner, the girl at the night club was enough to disturb his sanity. He felt like a parent who, on the night of a school dance expects merely to see a familiar, strident urchin wearing a pink dress instead of a middy blouse, and is suddenly confronted with a woman he has never seen before. She walks out of the little room with the "crush" pictures of movie stars and the camp pennants and the bookcase crammed with stories of Camp Fire Girls, and she answers to the urchin's name, but she is strange and challenging and surcharged with a quality he won't name. She is beautiful and desirable, and he gapes. And with that gape, she grows up and sheds the last tatters of an outworn personality. She has attained Sex.

But it was not Carl who gaped, nor Carl to whom Sis kept turning for her effect. It was to Aaron. And Carl suddenly realized that the idyllic little flirtation between the wise, controlled Aaron and the ridiculously young girl was neither idyllic nor a flirtation.

Carl took up the matter with Gabrielle on the dance floor. "What did you do to the pollywog?" he asked.

She understood at once. "It happens to all the pollywogs," she said. And then, because she didn't feel in the mood for allegory, she added, "After all, sex must have its fling."

"Sure. But who's going to get flung? Aaron or Sis?"

"Please don't be vulgar, Carlo. It's both important and solemn."

"Somehow," said Carl, "it makes me very sad to think of Milly tonight. She ought to be around to see Sis grown up."

Gabrielle squeezed his arm, as if he'd said something clever for a male and she was particularly proud of him.

Back at the table, Benning was staring intently at Sis. When Carl sat down again, Benning leaned over and spoke to him in a low tone. "If that girl only has a voice, she'll be marvelous. I'll double my prices, spike the liquor and pack them in. And I'll get publicity, too. I'll plaster it across the

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front of the building. Just her name and her picture, and underneath it one sentence. 'They murdered her mother.' That ought to bring 'em in."

"I'd like to discuss that with you, later on."

"Sure. Glad to hear any ideas you have. We'll go upstairs and talk. What's that?" Benning turned and cupped his ear to the waiter, who whispered something. Benning said, "Excuse me," and got up.

Carl watched Sis and Aaron. She was leaning back and laughing, and her hand came up and her fingers brushed Aaron's cheek. He bent close and she stopped laughing, but she still mocked him. She was playing rings around the platinum blonde in the corner, and she had harder material to work on, too.

Carl had trouble overhearing what Aaron and Sis were saying, but he watched the pantomime closely. Aaron was subdued, intense, and the sharpness had gone out of his eyes and left merely the dreaminess. Sis had found and was expressing a wanton quality, and Carl kept wondering why she chose to exhibit it in the dim corner of a night club. And to whom.

Not to Bree or Sonny. Hardly to Benning whom she had just met, nor to Carl for whom her only emotion was friendship. Which left no one but Aaron, whom she had already captivated. But Aaron was in love with the Sis who liked to play Mysterious Duchess at a soda fountain. Tonight he was meeting a totally different woman who obviously fascinated him but whom he might either like or dislike.

Watching her and wondering about her change, Carl kept asking himself where she fitted in. He recalled her urgent request to see the little stumblebum ahead of the police and her distraught talk of suicide immediately afterwards. And he thought of Gabrielle's story of the datebook. Exactly why had Sis grabbed it and then torn it up? To protect Pritchard? Had she known he had a date with Milly on Sunday? Likely enough. Pritchard's name written down plainly in a small, green engagement book. Maybe the case was as simple as all that. Milly had had a rendezvous with Pritchard, and she'd gone there and been killed.

But why did Sis want to protect Pritchard? And why couldn't the police locate him? Or find Kelly, for that matter? And certainly the little bum's role was crucial. He'd been at the scene of the crime. He'd gotten new clothes and a gun shortly after the murder. And twice he could have escaped, and hadn't. Maybe he'd been clever and realized that, once Carl knew the direction he'd taken, his capture was almost a certainty. And maybe Kelly's game was deeper, and his flights were a screen for something else. And all Carl could do was amuse himself with Gabrielle or sit in a night club and wait. Masterson, Crowder, Kelly — they all spelt danger, but one of them was far more menacing than the others. Which one of them had it all figured out, and when would he strike?

Then Benning returned and resumed his conversation with Carl. "I want you to see the show, Wayward. I've got an acrobatic dancer that'll knock your eye out. La Linda. Between her and Miss Keyser, I'll make this the Number One night club in town."

Sonny called out suddenly, "How

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about my act, Mr. Benning? Do I get a chance, too?"

Benning smiled benignly. "What can you do?"

"Juggle." Sonny grabbed a couple of glasses and a plate and tossed them. For a few seconds they stayed up, first the glasses and then the plate and then the glasses again. It wasn't bad juggling, as long as it lasted. But it didn't last. A glass banged on the edge of the table, the plate smashed to the floor and the other glass landed heavily in Sonny's lap.

He looked bewildered and chagrined, but determined. "Happens to the best of us," he remarked. "And anyhow, it would make a good act that way. Puts humor in it, see?"

Benning grinned genially. Then he saw the violinist signaling and he bent toward Carl. "Time for La Linda now. I have to announce her. Watch her closely, Wayward."

For a moment, as Linda Trevis entered and stood poised and smiling in the spotlight, she was motionless. She was dressed in black silk tights, and a black skull cap fitted tightly on her head. Her skin was glistening white and her black eyes flashed and glinted with a brighter sheen than her costume.

She had something, all right, but it wasn't human.

The dance might have lasted one minute or ten. Carl didn't know. He was scarcely conscious of the dryness in his throat and of the fixed, incredible attention of everyone at the table. Not until after she had finished did he wonder whether she went through the same hell every night.

He doubted it. With the final clash of cymbals, she stood swaying in the center of the little dance platform Her mouth split into her professional smile and her body bent low as she bowed. But she rocked slightly and Carl could see that she was shaken and dizzy. A drop of moisture slid from underneath the tightly fitting headdress. Then she turned and ran for the door. Despite the applause, she did not return.

After her, Sis was bound to be an anti-climax. She looked poised enough, but her hands were clasped in front of her in tight nervousness. Her voice was sweet and haunting, but it was small and she had not learnt how to project it. And yet, the contrast between the wild, reckless hysteria of La Linda and the unaffected purity of Sis was precisely what the audience needed. They required a letdown, and Sis gave it to them.

Benning walked out to the floor and took her by the hand. "Folks," he said, "this little girl just made her debut, and I think she's mighty fine. And if you like her as much as I do, let's hear you show it."

The applause echoed in the low-ceilinged crypt. Benning smiled and raised his arm for silence. "That's the kind of answer I wanted. And now I'm going to let you in on a little secret. There's a story about this little girl, but I'm not going to tell it tonight. Instead, I'm giving you an inside tip. Come around tomorrow night and you'll hear some headline news a day ahead of the papers. There'll be a round of drinks on the house, and money back to anybody who doesn't get the thrill of his lifetime. And I mean —" he let out his breath in a curious whistling sound and made a face like a moon. The audience broke out into laughter. "That's all, folks," he grinned.

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"See you tomorrow."

He led Sis back to the table and bowed low as he held out her chair. Suddenly Carl shivered. Something was getting out of control. The stumblebum, the opposition, whoever they were — they were aroused. Kelly's two attempts to leave town, his pair of car thefts and his returns to New Orleans. The phone call threatening Sonny and Sis. The phone call threatening — or warning — Carl. The third time, there would be more than a telephone message or an attempt to leave town. The third time would mean death. Carl felt it in his bones, and he shivered.

Then Benning leaned down over Carl's shoulder. "Come upstairs for a few minutes and we'll have that talk. I get interrupted too much down here."

Carl followed Benning through the bar and through a door behind a curtain at the rear, and up a short flight of stairs. There was a small skylight high above the landing.

"I rent the whole building," explained Benning, as he fumbled with his keys. "Bar and dance floor and kitchen downstairs, dressing rooms and my living quarters up here."

Then he opened the door and switched on a lamp. The room was crowded with carved furniture, with weird wooden ornaments and bright, striped hangings. The studio couch blared with its covering of red and purple and green, and the drapes over the French doors that led to the balcony screamed with orange and green and vermilion. Even at night and with a single lamp lit, the effect was garish.

Benning waddled gravely across the room and looked more than ever like an owl. "Mostly stuff I picked up in Mexico and Central America," he said. "I take my vacations down there. There's always so much to buy, and I can't resist. Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks." Carl sat down and crossed his long legs. Of the two doors in the side wall, one had to be a closet and the other must lead to the bathroom. Above the entrance, he noticed the buzzer bell had a strip of paper stuck to the clapper. A slight draft lifted it momentarily and then dropped it.

"I met La Linda this morning," remarked Carl, "but I had no idea of her intensity and recklessness. Does she always dance like that?"

"Nobody is mechanical. She was at her best this evening, but I've seen her give the same sort of performance before. Frequently. She has fire and temperament."

"I met her at the Huntingtons. They design her costumes."

"I was always under the impression she did the designing, herself. Apparently I was wrong."

"Huntington does it," said Carl. "I spoke to him on the phone and I believe I owe you an apology for the business in the dining room. But the coincidence was so striking, it sort of knocked me over. It seems that he paints from a photograph. Recall having had one taken about fifteen years ago?"

"Really!" said Benning. "Having your picture taken doesn't stick in your memory as a major experience. I've had professional pictures taken. Lots of them. I've acted as master of ceremonies for years, in my own places and others. Though I never had a picture taken with gray hair."

"Oh, that," said Carl. "The portrait wasn't finished. And Ollie may have made a mistake." Benning, owlish,

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tranquil, impassive, showed neither curiosity nor disbelief. Carl remarked, "You're offering Sis that job, I suppose?"

"Naturally."

"I'm afraid you can't go through with your publicity. You apparently know the background. AJ Masterson is Sis's uncle, and I work for him. He doesn't want publicity of any sort. That's why the papers haven't played up the crime."

"I'm not particularly interested in Masterson and what he wants. I run a night club, and I make money out of it any way I can."

"You won't even have your night club, if you insist on the murder angle. You know this town, Benning. The police can always find a violation and close you up, if they have orders to get you. So I don't think you'll make much money if you try to buck Masterson."

Benning shrugged. "If that's the way it is, very well. What can I do? At least you put your cards down."

"And Sis's job — she keeps it, of course? Even without the publicity?"

Benning's face was expressionless. Suddenly the buzzer sounded and the shred of paper oscillated with the frenzied motion of the little clapper.

Benning stood up. "They want me downstairs. Of course she'll keep her job. What the hell do you think I am? A nice kid like that!" He stamped heavily from the room and slammed the door.

Carl stood up. The portrait might have nothing to do with the murder, and naturally Benning would claim he couldn't remember whether he'd had his picture taken. In his place, Carl would have said the same thing.

He wandered over to the balcony exit and pulled the curtain aside. The balcony was screened and nobody could reach the courtyard below unless he was considerably smaller than a mosquito, which Benning wasn't. The only entrance to the apartment was through the barroom. Carl didn't know why he bothered checking, except that Benning had been too prompt about offering a job and Sis was having something psychological happen to her and Linda Trevis danced like a wild dervish. So what?

Carl picked up the record album on the phonograph and glanced through it. All swing, except for a record of *La Bohême*. The second album consisted of recordings of various orchestras that had played at Benning's cabaret. The other records, piled on the floor, were modern dance stuff.

Carl took it for granted that Benning had left him here so that he could search, if he wanted to. Carl hated to disappoint, so he checked on the bathroom door and then the closet. The closet had a half dozen suits and a few dresses in pastel shades. Carl closed the door. La Linda, he supposed.

He sat down and lit a cigarette. The more he thought about it, the less connection he saw between Benning and the Millicent Keyser murder case. Which was too bad. He'd have liked to work on a night club owner and a dancer who almost brained herself on the patrons every night. It would have been more fun than waiting around for the police to find an elusive little stumble-bum and a bashful dentist. Still —

The balcony door opened and a voice said cautiously, "Arthur?"

Carl didn't answer. The curtains swished and Linda Trevis stepped

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through. Her black hair was glossy and hung down to her shoulders. She was wearing a green kimono and as she stepped forward he saw her bare thigh.

Then she noticed Carl in the chair. "Oh! I didn't know —"

"He was called downstairs for a few moments," said Carl.

She wrapped the kimono tightly around her. "What were you doing at Poldi's this morning?"

"Didn't she say? Or didn't Gabrielle tell you? I'm working on a murder case."

"Him?" she said.

Carl shrugged. "I don't know yet where Benning comes in. Maybe you could tell me."

She shook her head dumbly. "I don't know. I never thought of it. I don't see how or why he could be connected. I never thought of it."

She picked up a cigarette and lit it. As she raised her arm, the kimono fell away. She was wearing nothing underneath it.

She walked over to the studio couch and casually pulled the folds together, but they parted again. "The damn thing won't stay closed," she said. She leaned back and pulled a couple of pillows under her head. "I'm tired. I shouldn't dance. It takes too much out of me. I have to rest afterwards. A couple of hours. Maybe it's my heart. I don't know. I'm afraid to see a doctor, because he might tell me I can't dance. Then I wouldn't have anything left. I'd hate to go back to impersonations. I like dancing. But I'm so damn tired." She blew smoke in a long thin breath. "Maybe it's T.B.," she added. "I'm the type. Too thin."

"How long have you been here?" asked Carl.

"Years. Just years and years and years."

"Always with Benning?"

"Always with Benning. With dear, dear Arthur. I'm good, Mr. Wayward. You saw that. I could make one of the New York revues, or one of the swank clubs up there. But do you think he'd let me? Not him!"

"Contract?" asked Carl. "Is that your trouble?"

"If it only were! This girl — Sis — when I heard about her, I thought I had a real idea. Get him interested in her. Then maybe he'd forget about me and let me go. That was why I arranged it. And all afternoon, when he was with her, and at dinner when I had to eat alone — I could kill him!"

"Why don't you just walk out on him?"

"I can't. Don't you see it yet?" She flicked the cigarette away and watched it land on the rug. Carl got up to rescue it. "No, I suppose you don't," she said. "I wish the damn place would burn up."

"What has he got on you?" asked Carl.

She sat up and smiled. It was a hard, bitter smile and she looked old. "Why should I tell you?" she asked. Then she rose and studied him cryptically.

"You're being a fool," said Carl dryly. "Either tell me the whole business, or else shut up about it. This way, you'll only get into trouble."

Outside, he heard steps mounting the stairs. Linda kept staring hypnotically. She moved forward without seeming to walk. Carl felt his heart pounding and hoped she'd say it before Benning came back.

Suddenly she threw her arms around him and planted her lips on his. The

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kimono was wide open and her nude body seemed to cling and writhe. Maybe it was just her temperament. But whatever it was, it came through like fire.

Then the door opened.

Benning said, "Linda!" She jumped away from Carl and stood there, half naked, with a look of terror that changed slowly into a bitter, contemptuous smile. Slowly and with a queer, tantalizing movement, she drew the kimono about her.

Benning strode across the room and faced Carl. "You damn!" he gasped. "You damn — damn —" His hand snaked out and slapped Carl. Carl didn't move.

Linda drawled, "Why don't you say it, Arthur? You haven't got the nerve!"

Benning yelped, "I'll teach you!" He wheeled and then stopped and turned back to Carl. "You came up here on purpose — to see her — that call just now — you were behind it — no other way of getting in here. *I'll fix you!*"

He rushed to his desk and yanked open a drawer. Carl realized then, and he took two long strides, leapt at Benning and whirled him around. In the open drawer, Carl saw the small, nickel-plated revolver.

Benning's eyes were fixed and glassy and his thick lips were parted. Carl said, "Close that drawer and get some sense and then turn around and apologize to her. She's supposed to be resting and she's all worn out and she almost fainted. Did you want me to drop her on the carpet or what? Make her lie down and rest, and then ask her what happened. You don't want to make a melodrama out of a slight case of vertigo, do you?"

Benning's arms dropped and his eyes turned normal. "I have such a temper," he said. "I act hastily and then regret it. You'd better go downstairs to your wife. I think your party's ready to leave."

"Sure. Thanks for your co-operation, Benning. And Miss Trevis, for your entertainment."

He closed the drawer before he turned his back to Benning. It was a small gun. Definitely smaller than a thirty-eight. And Milly, of course, had been shot with a thirty-eight.

Ballistics was such a nice science.

But then, Benning might have another gun.

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13: CHERCHEZ THE MAN

ALL THE NEXT DAY, Carl lived under the prod of a strange premonition. The air seemed heavy and surcharged, as if a storm were brewing, yet the sky was azure and the sun beat down hotly. He kept looking for the stumble-bum in every crowd. When he walked along the streets, his spine kept prickling, and once he whirled suddenly, under the overwhelming conviction that someone was aiming a gun at him. A woman a few feet behind gave him a startled glance. A boy called, "Shine, Mister?" Carl bit his lips and walked on.

But something had registered in his brain, and his subconscious was warning him, without disclosing the reason. He tried to pick his mind apart. A jumbled series of pictures swam across his memory and gave him no answer.

Poldi rocking with laughter as the stumble-bum drove off. Sis flirting with Aaron. Sis's eyes, wide and frightened, Aaron's dark as gun muzzles. Ollie casually taking Benning's portrait from an easel and saying, "Disregard it." Benning wrenching open the drawer containing his gun. Linda dancing. The stumble-bum whispering into the mouthpiece of a telephone. White's totem-pole face glaring sullenly. Crowder tugging at a leash and straining for the chance to get at Carl. Masterson, green-eyed and lipless, tossing a half dollar. Heads Carl dies, tails he lives. And weaving through all of it, the image of Gabrielle, now laughing, now frightened, now weeping inconsolably, like a widow.

Carl went about his business, performing the errands he'd set out to perform, and continually harried by the feeling that he ought to be somewhere else, that something was happening. He recalled the phrase that had come to him last night at the cabaret. Death in his bones. While Sis sang sweetly, in a clear, piping voice.

Late in the afternoon he strode into the hotel lobby and marched to the telephone switchboard. The professional southerner at the board lifted her saucer eyes at Carl and drawled, "Yes, Mr. Man. Anything you-all wanted?"

"I-all," said Carl stiffly, "will be in the bar for a little while, and if any calls come, then you-all just send in a boy to carry me-all to the nearest phone."

"Mr. Man," she said, "you do say the funniest things."

Aaron was sitting in the bar and staring disconsolately at his drink. When he saw Carl, he brightened momentarily. Then he kicked at a chair. "Two double scotches," he ordered. "And whatever this gentleman wants." He leaned back gloomily. "Sit down, Carl — where in hell have you been?"

"I just came from headquarters. Been going over reports with Crowder and they boil down to one thing. He hasn't found Pritchard. And he hasn't found the stumble-bum." Carl grimaced. "The rest of the day I've been avoiding Gabrielle."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Nothing. Except a suspicious na-

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ture."

"What's she suspicious about?"

"She found rouge on my collar and it wasn't her brand. She thinks I'm making what-do-you-call-it with La Linda. Whoopee or something."

"Are you?"

"Don't be a damn fool. Do I look as if I could turn cartwheels?"

"Any guy who can't explain a little rouge on his collar oughtn't to be allowed a marriage license."

"I explained it all right, and then she found out I waited for Benning to leave this morning before I went upstairs to visit Linda. So Bree decided to get mad or jealous or something. There were a couple of other suspicious circumstances, but hell! The only reason I waited for Benning to go was that he tried to pull a gun on me last night, when he found La Linda kissing —" Carl broke off and reached for his drink. "It was so damn innocent, but as soon as I try to explain it, it sounds all wrong. Why did I wait for Benning to go? Because of the gun. Why was I afraid of a gun? Because he tried to use it last night. Why did he try to use it? Because she kissed me. Why did she kiss me? To get him jealous. Why would he be so jealous because of a kiss? Because she didn't have any clothes on. You see how wrong it would sound if I told the truth, don't you? So I lied and Bree got suspicious."

"Carl, how did the clothes come off?"

"You have a dirty mind," said Carl.

"So have you, or you wouldn't have gone back."

"I went back because of the portrait. Ollie called me this morning to say Linda had claimed it, paid the balance due and gone off with it. So I went to see Linda, and she explained that she'd ordered it anonymously so she wouldn't have to take it if she didn't like it. Otherwise, as a friend she'd have felt obligated. She'd taken an old photograph of him — the only one she could find — and sent it to Ollie. She has the portrait in her dressing room now."

"Was she wearing clothes this morning?" asked Aaron.

"Slacks."

Aaron said, "Oh," in a disappointed tone. Then he tackled the second double-scotch. "She and Benning aren't married, are they?" he asked.

"If they are, they're not bragging about it. But she practically prays in front of his portrait and claims she's sort of a slave of his, and the very next moment she pretends she hates him and he's holding her in durance vile."

"So she takes her clothes off," added Aaron.

"Benning should have realized there was nothing to it."

Aaron perked up. "For a professor of philosophy, you're doing pretty well."

"Psychology," corrected Carl.

"You're still doing all right."

"Some rouge on my collar," snorted Carl. "Hell!"

Aaron sighed as if he were worried. He leaned forward and said, "Carl, what do you make of Benning?"

"From what angle?"

"Sis. Is he the sort of guy she ought to work for? Is he going to make passes at her and are these singing lessons that he wants to finance on the level?" Aaron frowned and his eyes went dreamy. "She's so damn fine, so pure. Sometimes, when I look at her, I feel as if I were defiling her, just being in the same room. I'm old enough to be her father. I'm twice her age, Carl."

"Wait a while and she'll catch up."

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Aaron shook the ice in his glass. "I'm no lily, Carl. I've been around plenty. A girl seventeen, and a man almost forty. It's ugly. The whole idea's wrong. There ought to be a law against it. But I'm hooked. I hate the idea of another man even looking at her. I hate like all hell the thought of a roomful of people staring while she stands in a spotlight and sings."

"You're certainly original," said Carl. "Nobody ever felt that way before. Do you always get original when you're drunk?"

"You don't understand," said Aaron.

"Ah!"

"It's like hearing a beautiful woman swear. You want to get under the floor and hide."

"Bree swears something terrific. I taught her how, like a parrot. I like it."

"You have no soul."

"Have you?"

Aaron tackled his latest drink. "I don't know. I'm trying to find out."

"Nobody ever found his soul in a whisky bottle. *In vino veritas* was written by a drunkard trying to convince himself before he could face the world again."

"Whatever that means. I'm trying to do some straight thinking."

"Don't kid yourself, Aaron. If you tried to think straight, you could settle this with two questions."

"What?"

"Do you love her?" said Carl. "And does she love you?"

Aaron picked up his glass and hurled it at the floor. "Hey, bartender!" he yelled. "Bring me another scotch. My glass busted!"

"That was smart," said Carl. "But until you can smash the guy who's holding you down, instead of hitting his face on a barroom floor, you'd better stay away from her."

"Thanks," said Aaron sarcastically. "That makes two epigrams. One about *vino* and this one about the face on the barroom floor. Hurray for epigrams! Hurray for Alpha Beta Bunk! Bartender, two more!"

"You're getting drunk," said Carl.

Aaron smiled quietly. "I can still think straight and my words don't blur, and in appreciation of your advice, I'm going to give you a little of the same."

"Well?"

"Pack up your bags and your very lovely wife, and get out of town before it's too late. The cards are stacked against you. The police are co-operating up to a point, but once you pass that point, they'll cut your throat. That's figurative. Literally, they'll beat the insides out of you. They'll either frame you or else throw your carcass over the state line and let the vultures finish the job. You're batting your head against a stone wall. You can't win. But you've got five thousand dollars, and if you disappear with it, I'll guarantee that nothing happens to you. And you can thank Sis for this."

"Aaron," said Carl. "We're neither of us the hard-headed realists we'd like to be. We'll both keep on pretending and describing fanciful little circles around a very pretty candle flame, we'll both get burnt and basically we'll both be proud of it."

"You can use words," sighed Aaron. "I just hate to see you dead."

"Thanks, but there's one factor you're leaving out. Before all these things happen to me, a guy by the name of Bettner is going to jump in and help."

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"You're wrong, Carl. He's just done all he's going to, and now he's washing his hands."

"Pilate?"

"Sure. Only don't make the mistake of thinking you fit into the other half of that analogy."

"I'm only a psychologist with a jealous wife," said Carl. "Don't worry."

He heard his name chanted from the entrance of the barroom and he turned and signaled to the bellhop. The boy marched over and handed Carl a slip of paper.

"Message for you, Mr. Wayward. Party phoned and left a message."

Carl picked it up and then slapped his hand on the table and yelped, "Holy mackerel — it's happened!"

"What did?"

"My hunch — the break in the case — the explosion! Listen to this." Carl lifted the slip of paper and read excitedly. "'If you want to see Dr. Pritchard, he's at his house this afternoon.' And what do you think of that?"

"Sounds like a gag to me," said Aaron. "The hell with it."

"You mean —" Carl stopped and couldn't believe what he'd heard. "I'm going up there fast. I tell you, Aaron — this is it! Coming along?"

Aaron shrugged. "What for? I like it here. I might even enjoy another drink."

Carl crumpled the bit of paper and stuffed it in his pocket. "Aaron!" he said sharply.

Aaron deliberately sipped his drink and placed the glass carefully on the table. He wiped a small stain with his finger.

"So you think it's a trap," said Carl slowly. "The sort of business you were warning me about. Is that it?"

Aaron went through the pantomime of a man washing his hands. "Who knows?" he said. "I'm not psychic, am I?"

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14: STRIKE TWO AND A HALF

RELUCTANTLY, like a condemned man on his last unwilling journey, Carl drove up St. Charles Avenue and glanced at the street signs. Each group of similar names marked the limits of one of the old plantations. The Greek muses, Euterpe, Calliope, Erato, Melpomene Streets. The numbered streets, First to Seventh. The Napoleonic group, Marengo and Jena and Austerlitz, and Napoleon himself who was a full-fledged avenue.

Why hadn't Aaron come along? That was what bothered Carl. He told off all the arguments to prove that he had nothing to worry about. He'd been upset all day and expecting the worst. Once, he'd wheeled on the street, and instead of the stumble-bum he'd seen a bootblack, and a woman carrying a package. Aaron's Pilate gesture had been merely a piece of drunken dramatics. He couldn't possibly know anything about Pritchard. Pritchard had fled the first day; if he had come back, he'd probably returned to confess. Carl would ring a door bell and be handed the case on a silver platter. Why would anyone bother harming Carl? He'd done nothing brilliant, made no accusations and dug up no startling evidence. As far as anybody knew, Carl was living in a dense fog of ignorance.

Still, why hadn't Aaron come along? Carl couldn't answer that one.

Driving up the broad, stately avenue with the azalea plots in the center and the row of mansions on either side, Carl tried to face the facts. Thus far, he had managed a precarious balance between Masterson and Crowder on the one hand, and the criminal on the other. That no one had yet struck a blow at Carl was beside the point. He'd been warned. The phone call. The stumble-bum's curious behavior. Crowder. Aaron's flat statement, "I just hate to see you dead." And the worst of it was that Carl had no idea when the attack would come, or from whom. Or, even, why.

He had no gun and no means of defense. If he was walking into a trap, the trap would spring and there was nothing he could do about it. He could have called in the police, of course, but he didn't trust them. He preferred to take his chances. And as for turning back, it was unthinkable. This might be a genuine break and he had to play it that way. Caution, wariness, hope. They were his only weapons. And hope was the most important.

The house was on a side street. A sign in fancy lettering read, "Walter Pritchard, D.D.S." Carl parked and glanced at the phony brick colonial with its antique effect of peeling paint. The doorway was wedged in the steep triangle of a gable that didn't belong. In fact, nothing belonged, and least of all Carl. Like a doomed man, he walked up the flagstone path and rang the bell.

The man who opened the door was one of the saddest people Carl had ever seen. He was dressed in gray. Gray suit, gray shirt, gray tie. The grayness seemed even to tint his skin, as if he were a member of a new and different

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race. The Gray race. The people who suffered and always would suffer.

Carl said, "Dr. Pritchard?" and the man nodded.

"I'm Wayward. I suppose you know why I'm here."

"Yes, I've been expecting you. You see, I called you myself. Come inside, won't you?"

Carl breathed a deep sigh. If Pritchard had made the call, he wanted to talk. The danger, if any, would come from someone else.

The dentist skirted a living room and led the way to a small, windowless office. Nervously, Carl followed. He half expected to find a little man with light blue eyes sitting in the office with a gun in his lap. But the office was empty. Pritchard sat down behind the desk on which a reading lamp glowed with a soft, sad light. It seemed to cast a film of gray dust on the surface of the desk and on the book with the gilt label *Engagements* stamped on the cover.

"Well?" began Carl. "Why did you send for me?"

Pritchard looked disconcerted. "I thought *you* had the questions."

"I've had them for two days, ever since I first heard your name. What made you hide out and then decide to talk? And how did you know my name and where I was stopping and why did you pick me?"

Pritchard wet his lips. "So many questions. I read the papers, of course."

"The papers never mentioned me, and they had damn little about the case, too. Milly is still an unidentified woman, as far as the press goes."

Pritchard took out his handkerchief and rubbed his neck, though the room was not warm. "Well, of course," he said. "Circumstances. People find out about those things. The word gets around."

His voice trailed off and he gazed uncomfortably at Carl. Carl had the impression that Pritchard was stalling, waiting for somebody. Was Pritchard the bait in the trap? Or was he the expected victim? And was Carl to be witness or an additional victim?

He said, "Really?" and hoped the strain would be too much for the dentist, that he'd stop stalling and blurt out whatever he had to say.

Pritchard licked his lips. "I — well, perhaps I'd better start at the beginning. Milly was a close friend of mine for many years. She was a fine woman. A clear, charming spirit. Every season I looked forward to her visit. I arranged my vacations so that I could take time off while she was here."

"You'd asked her to marry you."

"Oh, often, but she never would. She was a dear friend of mine, but nothing more. And now —"

"Now she's gone. When did you see her last?"

"Let me think." He wiped his neck again. "I've been upset. I think of her with emotion. My mind is hazy."

"Maybe I'd better refresh your memory. You saw her Sunday, the day she was murdered."

"Oh no. I hadn't seen her in several days."

"You had a date with her Sunday. She wrote it down in her engagement book."

"I had an appointment, but she didn't keep it. Perhaps I'd better start there."

"Go ahead," said Carl dryly.

"That was why I was so frightened. She spoke to me on the phone and said

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she had something important to tell me and she asked me to meet her on a street corner. Royal and Dumaine, at ten-thirty. I waited and then I heard the police sirens and I went to see what the trouble was. They told me, and I knew at once it was Milly. I got away somehow, climbed into the car and drove home. My mind was a blank on that entire trip."

"Your date," said Carl, "was for the evening?"

"Yes. Half past ten."

"And you didn't see her in the afternoon?"

"No."

Then Pritchard knew nothing, and the afternoon appointment that had upset Milly had been with someone else. Carl had never questioned that the notation in Milly's datebook referred to the afternoon. But if Pritchard was telling the truth, he actually knew nothing and had never played his role of confidant. If.

"Then why did you run away?" demanded Carl.

"I was afraid. You thought that perhaps I had killed her, didn't you? But I was fond of Milly." He rose, picked up a photograph of Milly and gazed at it with moistened eyes.

"How could I have harmed her?" asked the dentist, slowly. "I'm not impetuous and I'm not violent. For years I've known I had no chance, but I loved her. More and more, because I've been so lonely. Ever since Mother died, two years ago, I've lived here by myself. Mother was such a compassionate woman, and I miss her. I read a great deal and I think. All the things people should do, but don't. Even doing them badly would be better than not doing them at all. If they'd read the Bible and try to follow it. If they'd write down the thoughts they have in their better moments, and then reread them once a month. If people would only get together. The world is becoming schizophrenic."

He stopped speaking and gazed sadly at the photograph. Carl listened intently. A clock ticked from the next room. A car sped down the street. A dog barked. Nothing but the most commonplace sounds, ordinary and insignificant. And in front of him a gray man stood motionless and gazed regretfully at the picture of a dead woman.

Carl's voice, sharp and dry, punctured his own mood. "Why didn't you come forward and ask to help?"

"I couldn't have faced the police. I was too disturbed. I went away so that I could be alone. As soon as I felt I was well enough to talk, I came back and called you. But I couldn't have done it sooner. I drove to all the places I had ever been with Milly. Remembering seemed to help."

"Who killed her?" asked Carl.

The portrait crashed to the desk and the glass cracked. Pritchard's whole body jerked. "My hands," he said in a quaking tone. "You see? I'm still upset. I can't work. I couldn't even hold a drill. I don't know that I'll ever be able to again." He studied his long, bony fingers.

Carl said quietly, "You know who did it."

It was just a guess. Words, with scarcely an idea behind them, spoken in the hope that they'd startle Pritchard out of his lethargy.

They did. His eyes went frightened and he shot Carl a look of abject appeal. Carl's stomach twitched, and a

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sensation of nausea flooded through him. Then, if he'd really had an idea, the idea was gone and left nothing but a blank helplessness.

Carl struggled with the effort of interpreting what had happened to him. Pritchard had read Carl's mind in a kind of one-sided telepathy and grasped something of which Carl himself was unaware. But there was only one possible answer, only one person in the case to whom Carl could react so strongly. With one exception, he had no repressions and no concealments. The exception was Sis.

Outside, a car sped down the street and stopped. Carl swallowed and wished he hadn't come here, but Pritchard seemed suddenly to relax. He smiled, and his gray eyes met Carl's with a frank, confident ease. Somebody was approaching the house, and the dentist was no longer afraid.

"What you're trying to tell me," said Carl evenly, "is that you hadn't seen Milly in several days, that she called you and made an appointment and never showed up. That when you learnt someone had been shot, you knew it was Milly, and that the shock of it sent you into a sort of psychic trance during which you made a sentimental pilgrimage and dreamt the hard cold facts that never appeared in the papers."

"I am not innocent," said Pritchard softly.

Carl leaned forward. "So!"

"Don't misunderstand me. I didn't shoot Milly. How could I? And yet, I'm responsible. That's why I was so upset. But for me, she would never have been killed."

"You're talking in riddles."

"I can't help it. My own mind consists of riddles. How was I to know that it would be my fault? I thought I was helping, and then I found I'd been made a fool of and had committed a wrong that couldn't be undone. When I met Sonny and Sis — they're such fine youngsters. Sonny so manly, and Sis like a dabchick just finding her way around. Milly must once have been just like Sis is now."

"Somebody told you how to find me, Pritchard, and you called me instead of the police for a damn good reason. What was that reason?"

Pritchard stared dolefully and didn't answer. From outside, Carl heard a heavy step on the flagstone. He waited for the bell to ring.

By now, it must be dark. Carl listened intently and he seemed to hear the murmur of voices, but he wasn't sure. Then a single sharp tone came clearly, the word, "No!" torn out in an agonized intensity, and then stuffed back. There was no sound of scuffling.

"What was that?" demanded Carl.

"I heard nothing. Perhaps the neighbors —"

But Pritchard was lying. Carl knew that as they sat there, facing each other across the desk and waiting for the bell to ring. But it didn't.

"Who was the stumble-bum?" demanded Carl suddenly. "The little man with the beard — how does he figure in?"

"A man with a beard? Well —"

Carl heard a furtive, scraping sound from the entranceway. If a key grated in the lock, he'd turn around and run, for he was certain that within the next minute he would either be dead or would know who had killed Millicent Keyser.

"That's the only thing you have to

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tell me," said Carl. "The stumble-bum who was in the courtyard that night."

Pritchard sighed as if he had finally decided not to resist any more. "Yes, of course. The little stumble-bum. I'm surprised you didn't guess. It seems so obvious."

The gray, quiet man. The shattered portrait. The sliver of glass on the floor. The left shoe with a little flap of scraped leather. The silence outside and the footstep that hadn't been repeated. The silence here, while the ticking of the clock rose to a crescendo.

"Well?" said Carl.

Pritchard licked his lips and smiled. And then the shot banged out.

Carl jumped. For a moment, he thought Pritchard had been hit. Pritchard gave a little jerk and his hand clapped to his heart. He stared at Carl and Carl gazed back, two men frightened by the report of a gun, each waiting for the other to do something about it. An object thumped against the front door.

Carl leapt up and ran through the living room. He grabbed the knob and pulled, but the door stuck at the top and wouldn't budge. Carl tugged and the bottom part of the door shivered while the top held fast. Through the narrow, leaded windows framing the doorway, Carl could see that it was dark outside. A street lamp shone through one of the vertical panes. The other was black with shadows.

A jammed door. It was like a nightmare in which he knew he was dreaming and yet couldn't shake off his terror or the reality of his impressions. The silly, stupid fantasy of a door that wouldn't open. Somewhere, on the other side of it, was a man with a gun. He might be waiting, or he might be racing down the street. When the door opened, Carl might face the flaming madness of a gun. Or the stuck door might be the saving of his life.

For a few seconds, he went into a kind of frenzy. He put his two hands to the knob and wrenched furiously, and between wrenches he kicked savagely at the panels and felt the blows vibrate up to his kneecap. He kept muttering words and had no idea what he was saying.

Then his sanity returned. He looked up and saw where the door was warped, and he lifted up on the knob with all his strength, turned it and pulled. The door opened and the body flopped forward across the sill.

He was a small man. His knees were bent and one hand reached forward and almost touched the rug. His head hit the bare floor and made a plunking sound, and his hat slid forward and covered his face.

Pritchard said, "Oh my — oh my!" and backed away. Carl bent down and plucked gingerly at the hat.

It was the little stumble-bum. And that changed everything.

Carl stepped across the body and rushed down the path to the sidewalk. He saw no one. Whoever had done the shooting might have dashed toward the back, in which case he'd made good his escape, or might be hiding on the grounds.

The clump of shrubs halfway to the door was dark and thick and gave the only possible concealment. Carl stalked forward and kicked at the low branches. He moved cautiously and got ready to dive. In the center of the thicket he stopped and made a slow circle. Then he edged himself out, reached the lawn and strode back to the house.

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Pritchard was still standing there. His face was in shadow, but the sadness seemed to cling like a mask. He had not moved.

Carl dropped to his knees. Pritchard's black, lusterless shoes with the torn flap of leather were in Carl's line of vision. He said, "Grab the phone, Pritchard, and call the police."

Carl bent lower and felt the little stumble-bum's heart. It was not beating, and his fingers came away sticky. He stared at the white, drained face and the empty blue eyes. It didn't take pulses or mirrors to know that the little man was dead.

Carl saw the black shoes again, still motionless. "Call the police!" he exclaimed angrily. "Hear me?"

The shoes creaked and trudged out of sight. The little bum had been shot on the doorstep and had collapsed against the door. Simple and uncomplicated? Carl stayed there, thinking.

The stumble-bum coming here. Pritchard's statement that he was to blame for Milly's death. His alibi that Carl had believed and then disbelieved and now believed again. The statement Pritchard had held back, as if he were stalling. Had he been waiting for this? Was this why Carl had been summoned, and why Pritchard had been ready to give himself up?

Carl rose and dragged the body inside the house. He closed the front door. He was wondering why he hadn't heard Pritchard's voice on the telephone. Then a chair crashed from somewhere at the back of the house.

Carl whirled and sprinted past the little office, into a small dining room and through the swinging door. There was no light lit in the kitchen, but the opening door threw a sheet of reflected yellow. Carl saw the overturned chair and the body of Pritchard wriggling in midair, with the feet kicking out spasmodically.

Pritchard's shoes glanced off the table and smacked the side of the stove. A pot slid off and clanked metallically, while the bread board with a partly cut loaf shimmied to the edge of the table and teetered without sliding off. The bread knife glittered momentarily as the kitchen door swung partly open again.

Carl grabbed the knife and sprang toward the body. The feet, still kicking convulsively, caught Carl in the side. He grunted and grabbed Pritchard's waist with one arm, hoping to ease the strain on Pritchard's neck. With his other hand, Carl hacked at the rope.

The weight of the body came free unexpectedly and knocked Carl off balance. He fell hard, with Pritchard on top of him. The knife cut Carl's knuckles and the blood felt warm and somehow it was the only real thing that had happened.

He was stunned by the fall. He pulled himself from underneath the body and stood up, groping stupidly for the light cord which had brushed his face a few moments ago.

The electric bulb blinded him. Then he glanced down and saw Pritchard's dark face and staring gray eyes. Pritchard emitted a gurgling gasp of pain. Suddenly Carl began to laugh.

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15: ROPE-A-DOPE-DOPE

THE POLICE HAD COME and had gone. Crowder had barged in at the head of his men and stood staring at the dead body and the pool of blood. Then he'd stridden into the dining room and seen the dentist lying unconscious on the couch. He'd turned like an angry cat and snarled at Carl. "Well? What the hell did you botch up now?"

The ambulance had come and a doctor had examined Pritchard and loaded him on a stretcher. "Shock. And some kind of a blood clot. Can't tell here."

The morgue wagon had come. The photographers and fingerprint and ballistic and moulage men had done their stuff. Crowder had sworn and raged and sped back to his office. He'd interviewed everybody concerned in the case and sifted alibis, and out of all the work and detail and fuss, only two facts emerged. That Kelly had been killed with the same gun as Milly, and that no one except Aaron and Pritchard had alibis that amounted to anything.

Carl went to bed exhausted. Of all the things he'd envisioned, the murder of the stumble-bum was the only thing that didn't fit in. With the stumble-bum went the only eye-witness to Milly's death, and with him went all hope of explaining the telephone threats and the curious flights.

To be sure, Pritchard was in custody, and Pritchard had important information. But somehow, the murder of the stumble-bum had sealed the dentist's lips.

There was an obvious explanation. Pritchard had been afraid that if he talked, he'd get what Kelly had gotten. And he was so frightened and so certain it would happen that he'd tried to get it over with, immediately and by his own hand. Which meant that the killer would strike again.

Carl slept badly, and twice during the night he called the hospital. But Pritchard was resting calmly, under the influence of an opiate. There was a police guard at his door and no one had tried to see him.

When Carl woke up, Gabrielle was sitting at his bedside and gazing at him as if she were brimming over with love and the need to bare her entire soul.

Carl grinned at her. "What's the matter, Bree? Conscience bothering you?"

"Carlo!" she exclaimed. "You're so unjust!"

"Me? After the way you behaved over that Linda business?"

"Well, you certainly acted as if you were guilty. And until the afternoon, when Aaron explained what had happened, I had a perfect right to think things."

"You're your own worst enemy," remarked Carl. "When you get jealous you get beautiful, and I like you beautiful."

"Oh, Carl, you know I wouldn't mind if you picked somebody attractive. But that flat-chested hybrid with the mascara eyebrows — the least I expect from you is good taste."

"She tasted very good, what I had

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of her." He reached out for the phone. "Hello? Get me the hospital, please . . . And my name isn't Mr. Man, either. I've got a jealous wife and my name's Wayward and —" He held the instrument away from him. "I suppose that operator isn't good enough for me, either. You're damn right she isn't. Just you, Wiggin. You have nice legs this morning. Both of them."

"The better to run after you, my lord." She curtsied low. A voice burred from the phone and Carl spoke into it again.

"Hello? Third floor, please. . . . This the nurse in charge of Dr. Walter Pritchard? . . . Oh. The doctor there yet? . . . Good, put him on, please." Carl lit a cigarette, took one puff and discarded it. "Hello, Doctor? This is Carl Wayward, who brought in that hanging case last night. Pritchard. How is he this morning? . . . Huh-hunh. When can I see him? . . . Certainly I know he has a police guard. I put him there, sure. . . . Listen, I have to see him. He's involved in a murder and as soon as he wakes up he's liable to try suicide again and I have to be there first. . . . I'm telling you. Listen. I'll get a court order and a police squad and you ought to have sense enough to know where this'll get you, keeping a suspect doped up so that he can't be questioned. . . . Oh, that's better. I see. . . . Say around twelve, then. I'll call later and check. Thanks a lot."

Carl drew a deep breath and lit another cigarette. Gabrielle said, "What was all that about? Why so worried?"

"I dreamt he was dying and that he was out of his head and lost his memory and ran away to Texas, and so I wanted to see him first thing this morning. Now the doctor says Pritchard has a stiff neck and a bad case of shock and a swollen larynx and that he's under the influence of opiates and doesn't understand English."

"What's going to happen at twelve?"

"Doctor's going to blast him out of it. Oxygen and a shot of picrotoxin. That ought to bring him around with a clear head and the evidence dripping out of him like water from a rain barrel. I stand there and drink it in."

"But what can Pritchard possibly tell you that you couldn't get out of him yesterday? Except the hanging business, though I imagine he'll be bashful about that."

"I want to take up where I left off and learn something about the stumble-bum. And besides, I pulled a boner, Bree. A bad one. When I told Pritchard he was in Milly's datebook for Sunday, he said the date was for the evening, and I accepted his explanation. It sounded like the truth, the way he told it. But I think he tricked me, because he could have had two dates. Afternoon, and again in the evening. In the afternoon Milly consulted him and he told her to go ahead and see this person, and in the evening she was supposed to check back with him. She acted on his advice and got killed, and that's why he was so upset and kept saying it was all his fault. And now, I can't get over the feeling that I won't have another chance at him."

"Carlo, you worry too much. Why don't you talk it out and I'll put it all down on paper? You know — evidence, suspects and all that sort of thing." She sat down at the desk. "Then you can be logical about it."

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"Who wants to be logical? I have a couple of questions that keep me up in the air like a barrage balloon and I can't do a damn thing till I see Pritchard. I'm punch-drunk on theory, and all I crave in life is a good solid fact. Somebody to tell me things from the goodness of his heart."

"Then listen to what I did yesterday afternoon, while I was at Benning's. You see, when I was so mad about that little dancing slut who —"

"I know all about that," said Carl. "A flat-chested something with mascara around the ears."

"Eyes. So I investigated. She couldn't have left the place Sunday night without going through the dining room and the bar besides, but all Benning had to do was bribe the bartender to say he hadn't gone out. You see, the only exit is through the bar."

"I know. I checked up on the whole layout. The screened balcony, and so on."

"Well, I asked the bartender where Benning was Sunday night at ten, and he said Benning was in his room. And then somebody at the bar said, 'Why kid the lady, Jack? You know damn well I asked for him and you rang his bell and he didn't answer. You told me he must have gone out. Remember?'"

"Then the bartender laughed and said, 'Sure, but I was wrong. He was taking a bath. He came down about a half hour later and asked what I wanted to see him about. He couldn't hear his bell ring if he wasn't there, could he?'"

"You just have the bartender's word for that," remarked Carl.

"No, because I found somebody who remembered Benning coming downstairs and really saying it. And then I went in the kitchen, where they have the same hot water pipes and their hot water is cut off when Benning takes a bath, and they said the water had been running upstairs at ten. So — am I good?"

"You're wonderful," said Carl. "But nobody suspected Benning and what worries me is who shot the stumblebum. Pritchard was just going to tell me who he was, and then wham! The bum gets shot."

"What do you mean? I thought he was just somebody named Kelly."

"Maybe he is. But his murder practically proves someone else was in the courtyard when Milly was killed. Somebody who either got through a bolted gate or else made himself invisible and passed me in the corridor. I'm meeting Crowder and Aaron this morning and showing them the third way out. Otherwise, Crowder's likely to remember that the only other person in the courtyard was me."

But Carl had to go to the hospital first. He had to walk down the third floor corridor and poke his head through the door and see Pritchard lying there, alive and breathing. A big cop was sitting in a wicker chair, reading a paper. He lowered the paper noisily and glared at Carl. "What do you want?"

Carl studied the room carefully, and then shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing at all." He turned and walked away.

A hospital. Nurses. A staff physician. A big-faced cop with a shiny badge. Everything was impersonal, efficient, normal. Though he racked his brains, Carl could find no detail wrong, nothing but the commonplace and the

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expected. A cop, a sleeping man, a hospital room. There was no reason for his tension, and yet it persisted. A jittery sensation in his stomach.

He got in his car and drove down Canal Street. Crowder, after his first attack of rage, hadn't been bothered by the murder of little Kelly. He'd reasoned that someone had driven to Pritchard's house, met Kelly, shot him and driven away. The motive was probably to eliminate the only eyewitness, and so there was no new problem. Merely additional evidence bearing on the crime. The chances of getting the killer were doubled.

Crowder had been thorough in his check-up of alibis. Sonny and Sis had been reading in their room, Ollie and Poldi had been home playing bezique. Linda had been in her room and Benning in his, taking a bath. Neither of them could have gone through the bar.

Carl bit his lips. There was a strange similarity to the alibis for the time of Milly's death. Reading, bathing, bezique. Why bezique, of all crazy games? Sure. And why murder?

Carl turned into Chartres Street and felt that somehow he was on the verge of discovery. Those alibis. One of them had to be faked. An idea seemed to be pushing upward, like a physical object trying to break through his cortex. But the idea never quite made it, and Carl gave up when he turned into Chartres Street and saw Crowder's car parked in front of the building.

He was pacing up and down the sidewalk, shooting an occasional remark at White and Aaron and another plain-clothes man. At sight of Carl, Crowder stuffed his hands in his pocket and marched forward belligerently.

"Well?" he snapped. "Call this ten o'clock? I got nothing to do but wait on street corners for you, huh? Me and four hundred and fifty thousand other people are just hanging around doing nothing, till you crack Pritchard or finish your breakfast. Let's get started. What the hell do you want? You said you had something important."

"I think I've doped out how Milly was shot."

Crowder bristled up. "She got killed with a gun," he said. "You're not going to make that complicated, are you?"

"With a gun, but nobody was holding it."

"How do you figure that one?"

"I saw the gun pointing at me from the push-cart, when I went in here that night. If it was Kelly's gun, he'd have picked it up, but he didn't. So there had to be someone else, to throw the gun in the pushcart and then take it away. And whoever he was, he never walked out of the courtyard."

"Let's go get him now," drawled Crowder. "Four days is too long to make him wait. We got to be fair."

"He was never in the courtyard," said Carl. "He was up on the roof, and that's where I want to go now. It hasn't rained since Sunday night, and if we're lucky —"

Crowder yawned. "You brought me here to go climbing up on a roof, huh? Geez! What the hell did I ever do to get you wished on me?"

"How about going inside and getting a ladder?" asked Aaron. "Let's get down to facts."

"If you want facts," said Crowder, "the bullet traveled upward, didn't it? How could it go upward if it was fired from the roof?"

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"The gun wasn't on the roof," said Carl, "but the killer was. My idea is that the gun was planted in the pushcart and aimed so that it would hit somebody in the corridor. Maybe just moving the pushcart fired it, or maybe the man on the roof fired it by pulling a string. That part I can't tell you."

The police chief uttered a low, whistling sound. "You may have something at that, Wayward. Pull the gun up to the roof, after she got shot, and then the guy beat it. We had a case like that, once. Two guys killed their landlord, and the one that did the shooting threw the gun up to his pal on the roof, and the pal ran across to the next house and went down a skylight. We got the first guy, and boy! did we make him sing. I hadn't thought of that. But where you got it wrong is that this was a two-man job."

Carl led the way through the narrow, musty corridor. Through the archway, he saw the inner courtyard and the old, unused truck on which he'd sat and where he'd tried to leave Milly's pocketbook. He remembered how a cop's persistent loneliness and an innocent remark had prevented him from disposing of the bag. If Carl had succeeded, there would have been no Masterson and no murder case in his life. Just an evening's adventure in which he'd have played a slight, incidental part.

At the entrance to the courtyard he stopped and turned. The interior of the arch was rimmed with wood, where a door had once hung. The screw-holes and the indentation of the hinge plates were still visible. About halfway between them, a long piece of string dangled from a rusty nail.

Carl pointed, and let Crowder convince himself. The chief lifted up the five-foot string and studied the loop on the end of it. He whistled softly and said to the detective, "Gilby, bring over that pushcart. I want to try something."

Gilby wheeled over the small cart and Crowder placed it so that it blocked the entrance. "That how it looked when you first came in, Wayward?"

"Just about."

"And the gun — remember how it was placed?"

"Not too clearly. I wasn't thinking of trick murders at the time. But I'm pretty sure it was propped up with a block of wood. Whether it was wedged or not —" Carl shrugged.

Crowder studied the loop on the end of the string. "Gil," he said. "Step outside and keep people away from the door."

The police chief picked up a few blocks of wood and a rusty tire iron. He arranged them in the pushcart and then wedged his gun so that it pointed toward the open end of the cart. He backed into the courtyard and stretched the string. It reached the gun with a few inches to spare.

He looked up and grinned. "How am I doing?" he demanded. Then he slipped the loop over the hammer and cocked the gun.

"Like that?" he asked. "As well as you can remember, was that the setup?"

Carl nodded. "Just about."

Carl and Aaron and White were standing in the courtyard, a few feet behind Crowder. Crowder yelled, "All clear, Gil — she's coming!" Then he looked at Carl. "Like this. The Keyser dame comes along and wants to get to the courtyard. So she pushes the cart —"

Crowder pulled it toward him. The

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gun wabbled for a second. Then the string went taut and tightened on the hammer. The shot exploded and Crowder burst out laughing. "Like that!" he bellowed. "Just like that!"

He stood there grinning and looking for the bullet mark on the concrete wall of the corridor. Somebody shouted from the balcony and Crowder turned and said, "Go on back, you — police work. Go on back to the dishes." He was as pleased with his experiment as if the idea had been his own.

"Looks like we got something," he remarked. "With luck, there might even be powder deposits on the string. I dunno. I'll turn it over to the laboratory boys and see what they can make out of it. Then if we get that, we might be able to trace the cord, too. Had a case a couple of years ago where a guy strangled some dame he'd been sleeping with. Did it with a piece of fishing tackle, and we traced the line and had the guy cold. Hey, Gil — come on back. We're waiting!"

The other half of the problem, how the killer had reached the roof, meant a long and painstaking search. White found a ladder and the police party climbed up to the roof. Carl, the last to go up, saw a few chimney pots and a low brick wall over which a child could have jumped. But once you reached the roof of any building in the block, you could travel over the roof tops to any other point.

Crowder strode over to a skylight and ran his fingers along the cracks of the opening. Dust was thick, and the flakes of rust were wedged fast.

"This thing hasn't been open in a year," he remarked. "Get the idea, boys? Find a skylight that's been used recently, and then go through the building and find out who used it. You two start toward Royal Street, and me and Wayward and Bettner'll take the other direction."

Carl clambered over the first parapet and began the slow, tedious search. The sun beat down and the soft tar sucked at his shoes. He kept glancing at his watch and thinking of Pritchard, doped up in a hospital bed and ready to talk and give the first major break in the case. After a while Carl couldn't stand it any longer. He announced that he had to make a phone call and that he'd return as soon as he could.

He made his way thoughtfully across the rooftops, climbed down the ladder and walked out to the street. There was a phone booth at the corner and he called the hospital. Pritchard was still under the effects of the opiates and the floor nurse resented Carl's questions. He hung up, but instead of returning to the roof, he sat in his car. The idea he'd almost had before. The hole in one of the alibis. He tried to get it back, but it kept eluding him. After a while he sighed. Maybe he was kidding himself. Maybe he hadn't been close to anything at all. He went back through the corridor and started up the ladder.

As he reached the top, he saw Aaron and Crowder sitting on a parapet and arguing about something. At Carl's approach, Crowder looked up.

"We got it!" he said triumphantly. "White and Gilby are checking, but they probably won't find much more. We got a skylight that was used, and a ladder underneath it that somebody had moved around, and Sunday night somebody that didn't belong was prowling through the building, so I guess we can figure the killer could have got up that way. But your idea's cock-eyed. And

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Bettner agrees with me, too."

"What's the matter with my idea?"

"It wouldn't work," said Crowder. "You plant a gun in a pushcart. Sure. But even admitting it was timed right and that the Keyser dame is the only one who'll come through — what are the odds on committing a murder that way? You don't see her. She may be standing to one side of the pushcart or she may be bending over. You don't know where she is and you can't aim. And you can't risk just wounding her, on account she'll tell who she was supposed to meet. You got just about one chance in a thousand of killing her, and just because it worked out that way is no reason for supposing anybody was dumb enough to try it."

"That's the whole point," said Carl. "Milly wasn't murdered."

Aaron developed a sudden interest and Crowder grunted, "Huh? I didn't cart a stiff out of here Sunday night, did I? This bastard Masterson didn't come down and tell me how to run my department, did he? I'm just sitting here on a roof because we went to the same nuthouse together and we want to talk about old times. What's the trick, Wayward?"

"There's no trick. It just wasn't murder, because there was no intention to kill. Whoever rigged up the gun wanted to wound her, or maybe only scare her, presumably by way of threat so that she wouldn't or couldn't carry out some plan of hers."

"Like getting married?" demanded Crowder sharply.

Carl shrugged. "Maybe."

"Well, from what I been hearing, there are just two people who didn't want her to get married, and who were capable of pulling a stunt like this. And they were her own two kids. Sonny and Sis."

"You're wrong there," said Carl quietly. "There was definitely somebody else."

"Who?"

Carl took a deep breath and then let it out.

"Jeremy Keyser," he said.

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16: PAL WITH A PUNCH

THE POLICE CAR PARKED in front of the big, modern hospital and Crowder got out briskly and marched up the steps, with Carl and Aaron in his wake. Crowder glowed with confidence. A guy knew something and wouldn't talk. Crowder slapped his hands together. They were the hands that were going to rip the answer out of Pritchard's liver, if that was the way Pritchard wanted it. But Crowder was certain he'd get his answer.

He stepped smartly out of the elevator and with his arms swinging he stamped up to the desk. "I'm Chief of Police Crowder," he barked. "Where's Dr. Pritchard's room?"

The nurse's eyes fluttered timorously. She stood up, a tall, prim woman confronted with a problem that was outside her field. "Oh. I just phoned you. I'm so glad you came. It wasn't our fault, really."

"What wasn't? What the hell happened here?"

"Dr. Pritchard," she said, and was too nervous to continue.

"What about Pritchard?" roared Crowder. "What the hell did he do? Commit suicide on us?"

"Oh, no," she breathed. "Nothing like that. He simply disappeared."

"How could he, with a cop there?"

"I don't know. I'm so upset. The policeman's there, in the room. I don't know how it happened. The policeman left the room for just a few minutes, and when he came back, Pritchard had simply gotten dressed and walked out."

Crowder snorted and bowled past her. Carl lingered until the chief had marched out of sight. "I'm Wayward. I called up earlier and made a nuisance of myself, but I was afraid of something like this. Don't let Crowder worry you. Pritchard's escape was no mere accident, was it?"

"I don't know. Really I don't. We gave him the anti-opiate treatment about an hour ago, and his reaction was excellent. His mind was clear and he seemed quite calm. When I left, he was lying quietly in bed, with the policeman sitting in the doorway and reading some comic-strip magazine. And then, just a few minutes ago, the policeman came yelling at me and saying Pritchard had escaped and it was *my* fault."

"Did anyone visit Pritchard?"

"Oh, no. He couldn't have visitors."

"And this cop — was he in the room all the time? Except when Pritchard walked out, of course."

"Really, I couldn't tell you. I'm all over the floor. Ice bags and injections and temperatures to take. Really, I can't bother with a policeman." She adjusted her cap and smiled faintly. "During working hours, that is."

Carl grinned and strolled down the corridor in time to see Crowder in action. "The closet's locked, but it's empty," he was yelling at the cop. "You claim you told a nurse to watch him a couple minutes, but you don't even know which nurse it is. Holy hell! You're going to get smashed for this!"

"What do you want me to do, Chief?" protested the cop. "I have to go to the bathroom, don't I? What do

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you think I got? One of them no-leak inner tubes in me?"

"By geez! You'll get a brick-bat on your skull! The guy gets up and opens the closet, puts his clothes on and walks out. And where the hell are you?"

"I," said the cop, "was in the —" Then he stammered. Crowder glared in cold rage. He whirled when Carl touched his shoulder.

"I'm going up to Pritchard's house," said Carl quietly. "Aaron and I. You can handle this end of it and organize the search for him, and we'll look through the house. I'll call you at headquarters, whatever I find."

Carl turned and retraced his steps. He kept telling himself that it was twice as stupid to have foreseen and done nothing than never to have foreseen at all. The thought was no consolation.

He didn't speak until he and Aaron were speeding uptown in the taxi. Then Carl said, "There's only one way to get your clothes out of a locked closet."

"How is that?"

"With a key," answered Carl. "Some people pay me as high as five thousand dollars to make deductions like that."

"You're underpaid," remarked Aaron. "I'll have to speak to AJ about it. For five thousand, how do you get a key to a hospital closet?"

"You get it for less than that," replied Carl. "The only real question is who bribed the cop to give Pritchard his clothes and then walk out of the room. I don't think Pritchard did it all by himself."

"Let's go find him and ask," said Aaron. "And I don't even charge for that suggestion."

The first thing that Carl noticed at the house was the open door of the garage, and he sighed with relief. "Well, at any rate he's given up the suicide idea. He's not likely to take a farewell ride with himself. Let's get inside, Aaron."

The front door was locked, but a window slid up and all Carl had to do was hack at the screen and swing it back. He walked straight to the phone and dialed headquarters.

"Hello — Wayward speaking. Get this down, will you? Dr. Walter Pritchard, wanted for questioning in connection with the Keyser case, escaped from the hospital. That much you know. He's going somewhere in his own car. Look up the license numbers and get a description of the model and so on. I want a pick-up order sent out. He's about forty years old, and was wearing a gray suit, gray hat and coat. Hair light, sparse and running to baldness. Eyes —" he broke off and turned to Aaron. "What the hell color are his eyes, Aaron?"

"Gray."

Carl turned back to the phone. "Eyes, gray. Height, about five feet nine. Weight, around a hundred and fifty." He described Pritchard feature by feature. "Get the information to Crowder. I'll be up here at Pritchard's for a while. Get in touch with me if anything turns up." He put down the phone and sighed. "Let's look around, Aaron."

"What do we look for?"

"Dental records, bank books and personal correspondence. Suppose I take the dental records. You can go through his desk and drawers and keep your eye open for any letters to Milly. If he keeps stuff, there ought to be one. And in his checkbook, see if there are any regular payments or large withdrawals in cash. What I have in mind

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is blackmail."

Carl went into the small office where he had spoken to Pritchard last night. The filing cabinets were ranged against one wall. Carl slid open the first drawer and looked at the K's. There was no Keyser. He tried the H's next. There was no Huntington. Finally he thumbed through the B's. Arthur Benning had not been a patient. Carl took off his hat, pulled up a chair and then he really went to work.

Aaron watched from the doorway. "What's the blackmail theory, Carl?"

"It depends on the Jeremy Keyser idea. This marriage business that Milly always shied away from. The children wanted her to get married, she wanted to get married, and she was attractive and must have had plenty of chances. But she didn't."

"It's happened before."

"Then, for the first time, she brings her children down to New Orleans. Yanks them out of school, which makes it pretty important. She keeps talking about getting them a father, and in the same breath she promises she won't marry. Well, Jeremy would answer that, wouldn't he? Because she's already married to him. And remember that she never believed in his death."

"Where does Pritchard fit in?"

"Pritchard was in the accident that supposedly cost Jeremy his life. Pritchard's dental charts established the fact of Jeremy's death, and an insurance company paid out ten thousand on that basis."

"Insurance fraud," murmured Aaron. "So if Jeremy wasn't killed, he could threaten Pritchard with a prison sentence for gypping the insurance company. And even if the charge didn't stick, to a dentist the scandal would be fatal. Lose him his practice."

"His practice, and Milly besides. And so, when Pritchard saw himself in a corner where all this was likely to come out, he tried to hang himself. Now get busy and see if you can find any evidence of blackmail payments. From Walter Pritchard to Jeremy Keyser, in fear."

Aaron walked to the desk and sat down. Carl bent over the filing cabinet and studied names, addresses, dates. If Jeremy was alive, Pritchard knew it. If Pritchard knew it, his business files might contain the proof, indirect, roundabout, back-handed, but somehow — proof.

Presently Aaron looked up. "Got it," he exclaimed. "One hundred bucks the tenth of every month, over and above what look like cash expenses. Sometimes he drew cash the day before or the day after. Thirty or forty at a time, usually. But that hundred on the tenth of the month was too regular, and more than he'd need for himself."

"Got the vouchers on it?"

"A couple, but they only show Pritchard's signature, and you need more than that."

Carl stared thoughtfully and wondered. When the phone rang, Aaron picked it up. "Hello? . . . Sure, just a minute." He held up the instrument. "For you, Carl. Police."

Carl listened excitedly. "Wayward? We just got a report of an accident out on the Huey Long bridge. A crash, and when they went out to look, there was nothing but a busted guard-rail. So somebody went into the Mississippi, and the description of the car checks with Pritchard's. We'll drag the river, of course, but that'll take a long time."

"Wait a minute," said Carl. "If it's

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Pritchard, maybe somebody noticed him on the way out. Maybe he stopped for something. To eat or get gas or —"

"Listen, when you're on your way to knock yourself off, you don't load up your gas tank."

"Sure. But how do you know it was suicide? Or that it was Pritchard?"

"Well, all we know is that it was no ordinary accident. Guy might have fallen asleep or had a fainting attack, of course, but there were no skid marks on the bridge. And if it wasn't suicide or an accident, then what the hell was it?"

"Murder," said Carl. "Either murder or else —" He glanced at Aaron who was watching closely. "Just let it go at that," said Carl. "Keep working on it and keep in touch."

He hung up, replaced the phone and lit a cigarette. "Well, Aaron," he said. "I'm not going to kid around any more. What happened to Pritchard?"

Aaron frowned. "How would I know?"

"You arranged it. What happened to him?"

"I don't get you."

Carl shrugged. "Let's skip it, for the moment. You don't know Pritchard. You never knew Milly. You reached New Orleans Monday morning by plane, from Washington. You can prove all that, can't you?"

Aaron licked his lips. "I knew Milly. In fact, at one time I knew her quite well."

"You knew Pritchard, too. Equally well."

"No," said Aaron.

Carl put out his cigarette. "Aaron, you were here in New Orleans the day Milly was killed. I can go to a lot of trouble and prove it, or you can admit it and save me the effort. You made me wonder about that practically from the beginning. Remember the ride from the airport? Masterson asked how he stood down here. He asked whom to see, what the political setup was and how much it would cost. If you'd been traveling together all night, you'd have covered that long ago. What else would there be to talk about? Masterson's a practical man. He makes his plans ahead of time. So I got to wondering just how long ago you'd met him, and what important matters you had to report on before landing in New Orleans."

"If you're so damn good, maybe you can guess that, too."

"Maybe. The next time you gave yourself away was when we had a drink in the bar and you called me a professor of philosophy."

"Well, what are you? A detective?"

"I had a newspaper write-up two days before the murder and it called me a professor of philosophy instead of psychology. So you must have been in New Orleans and read the paper the day the stuff was published."

"I couldn't have read it a couple of days later, could I?"

"Not likely," said Carl. "And you knew Pritchard. You were burning up to go sleuthing every time I had something to do, until I got a note from Pritchard. Then you weren't the least bit interested."

"I'd been drinking. I was drunker than you realized."

"Nuts. You merely didn't want to see him because he'd identify you."

"And I suppose I only went to the hospital today because I knew he'd escaped. I'd arranged it. That's where you started, Carl."

"Exactly. If you never saw him,

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how'd you know the color of his eyes?"

Aaron laughed. "So that was why you asked. A trap! A ten-cent thriller detective throwing out a casual question and tricking me into telling the color of his eyes. Of all the stupid, weak, inane conceit — Lord, Carl! Don't make me laugh. Sis was talking about him once and she described him as a sad man with gray eyes. That's all there is to it. Satisfied?"

"No. I wouldn't accuse you unless I were damn sure of what I was saying."

The phone jangled again and Carl picked it up. He listened carefully and then put it down. "Police again," he said. "A man who looked like Pritchard stopped for gas and headed up toward the bridge. That kills the suicide theory. You should have thought of things like that ahead of time. Or didn't you have the chance?"

Aaron stood up and moved toward the window. Carl said, "You had cocktails with Milly on Sunday. You and she and Pritchard."

Aaron turned around. "I saw her and Pritchard for a moment, on Sunday. Naturally, I didn't want to get mixed up in this. But our conversation was casual, and that was all. I'd been down here on some confidential business that had nothing to do with Milly. Sunday night AJ called me and said she'd been murdered, that he was flying down and I should meet him at the Mobile airport. He refueled there, and I sneaked into the plane. The flight took less than an hour. We decided not to mention my stay here. The police wouldn't bother us, and AJ could say I'd come all the way from Washington, and nobody'd dare dispute his word."

"Don't be naïve. Even if I can't get action in New Orleans, I can anywhere else. Aaron Bettner, who had an affair with Millicent Keyser, and after her mysterious death went after the daughter. It's a nice dirty case. First the mother, and then the daughter."

Aaron's eyes went murky. He stepped slowly forward. Then his fist doubled up and he struck Carl in the face. The blow glanced off Carl's cheek and he stood there, stunned with surprise and somehow unable to digest the fact that he'd been right about Aaron. Aaron, whom he'd hung around with all week and considered as a friend. Aaron, who'd fallen in love with Sis and worshipped her with the tenderness and delicate awe of a high school kid. Aaron was guilty as hell, and didn't even bother explaining.

A wave of frustrated anger swept through Carl. For the first time since he could remember, he was faced with something that words wouldn't help. Words and thought could only make it worse. Suddenly he lowered his head, stepped forward and swung.

He practically closed his eyes. His arm fanned the air and Aaron's fist licked at his jaw. Carl bounced back and threw up his guard. Chin hunched and buried in his shoulder, left arm extended and weight on his toes, the way he'd been taught years ago, Carl danced forward. His fist jabbed out. Aaron ducked again, hammered at Carl's elbow and connected for the second time. Carl felt as if his head had been jarred off his neck.

He tried it again, keeping his eyes wide open and focused on the target of Aaron's jaw. This time his knuckles grazed flesh, but Aaron's fist rammed home and almost knocked Carl off his feet. He got really mad, then. So he couldn't box. So he was no rough-and-

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tumble fighter and he was due for a beating. All right. But Aaron was going to know he'd been in a fight, too.

Carl waded forward and struck. Left, right, left, right. Aaron came in under the blows and smashed at Carl's body. Then Carl's fist smacked and his knuckles stung. Aaron backed away and Carl followed up. Aaron wasn't hitting Carl's face any more. All right. Carl automatically followed Aaron's lead. Carl's blows were landing now. His arms were getting tired and Aaron was backed up in a corner and Carl wasn't getting hurt. He kept on hitting until he could hardly lift his arms.

Aaron was gasping. He had a big reddish area under one eye and he could barely breathe. Carl couldn't breathe, either. He wasn't mad at Aaron any more. He had a general anger, and he was tired and his body felt sore and he wasn't sure what had started all this or what it could ever settle.

Carl grunted, "I'm tired." Aaron lowered his arms and sank down in a chair. Carl dropped on the small couch.

"Well?" he panted. "Ready to talk?"

"About — what?"

"The reason you were down here. Before the murder. Why you helped Pritchard — get away."

Aaron didn't answer. For about five minutes they sat there glaring at each other and not talking. Then Aaron took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, picked one out and threw it to the floor. "Damn things are busted," he said.

Carl's weren't much better. The cigarettes were flat and twisted, but he found two whole ones and stuck one between his lips and tossed the other at Aaron. It didn't reach. Aaron cursed and got out of his chair and picked it up. They smoked in silence for a while.

Finally Carl said, "Fighting never settled a damn thing. I don't know what the hell we did that for."

"We did it because you're a pigheaded ass and made accusations. You better take them back."

"The hell I will."

"Listen. If you spread stuff like that, I'd be useless to AJ. He pays me a good salary. I like good salaries."

"So?"

"I want to make it clear, so that you can't go around saying I did something behind your back. I can send for AJ. You know what he can do."

Carl shrugged. "I know what he can't do. He can't buy me."

"Don't be a goddamn prude. You were in the courtyard when she was shot. You sneaked off with her pocketbook and concealed evidence about a gun. You bribed a cop and doublecrossed first Crowder and then AJ. He can just about convict you of murder, and you know what that means."

"Sure. I get beaten up. All the crooked, lousy cops and politicians gang up on me. And as for doublecrossing AJ — I told him when I took the case that I was going after the murderer, and not protecting somebody for the glory and profit of dear old AJ."

Aaron shrugged. "I'm taking care of myself. Twenty-four hours from now, you'll be a murder suspect and the cops will have orders to shoot you on sight. I know how AJ handles things."

Carl didn't answer. Aaron picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Masterson & Co.?" he said. "Bettner talking. Give me Ritter. . . . Hello, Clyde? Wayward caught on to the Pritchard business. I want you to phone AJ and tell him there's trouble. Wayward doublecrossed him and he'd better come

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down. Tell him I won't take the authority for a move like that. You know . . . Yeah. I'll stop in, later."

"You haven't the guts to do it yourself," said Carl. "But you'll call AJ all the way down here and let him do it."

"You're damn right I will. I'm going back to the hotel. Coming?"

Carl stood up. "I may as well. Better wash your face and get the blood off."

"Same to you," said Aaron, "or they won't let you into the place."

Carl walked over to the desk and picked up the checkbooks. "Are these the ones with the vouchers?"

"How do I know?"

Carl glared. "Sis," he said, "will be real pleased. She'll have a lot of sympathy when she sees that shiner of yours, but when you tell her you called in AJ, she may feel a little different."

Aaron's dark eyes clouded. "Leave her out of this."

"The guy is chivalrous," said Carl sarcastically. "Her very name is sacred."

"Shut up!" snapped Aaron. "One more crack like that —"

"Well?"

"I'd hate to get sore, because I'd just about murder you."

"Remarkable," observed Carl. "You just hit me in a spirit of good, clean fun."

"Sort of," said Aaron. "I came out of the gutters and back alleys, and when I really fight, I practically commit mayhem. Take a look at your map, if you can stand it. There's hardly a scratch mark on it."

"What do I do now? Break down and cry and thank you for being nice?"

"I gouged a man's eyes out, once," said Aaron. "Just remember that. I never was a gentleman and I never want to be."

Carl wanted to hit him again, but he was too tired.

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17: A SHOT IN THE PANTS

WHEN CARL OPENED the door of his hotel room, Gabrielle looked up from the writing desk and then jumped to her feet. "Carl!" she exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Bree. Why?"

"Carl!" She was in his arms and her fingers were brushing his cheek. "Your clothes are torn and your collar's ripped and there's blood on it. What happened?"

He said, "Ouch! Don't squeeze me. I had a fight."

"With whom?"

He gazed down at her. Her light silky hair that his fingers played with so often and so gently. Her small child's nose with the narrow, delicate nostrils. Her eyes, brown and tender now, and worried. She was part of him, and one of her fundamental rights was her right to share all things. He'd intended to tell her as little as possible, but it struck him that if Masterson threatened him, Gabrielle was threatened equally.

"Let me lie down and rest, Bree, while you run me a bath and get me some clean clothes. I had a fight with Aaron. He sent for Masterson, and once Masterson is here I'll have to get out of town. I have about fourteen hours."

"Carl," she said. She walked into the bathroom and he heard the water tap turn on. When she came back, he'd taken off his tie and his jacket and he was stretched out on the bed. She sat down next to him.

"About fourteen hours," he said. "Say until eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Then Masterson will tell the police to frame me for a couple of murders. I was the only person present at both killings. They'll trump up a motive and — well, the details aren't particularly important."

"They can't do that!" exclaimed Gabrielle fiercely. "And if there's any danger, the hell with it! You have the money — the case isn't worth risks. Let's pack up now and go. Give me just one good reason why we should stay."

"It's funny how we're made, isn't it? A twenty-dollar a week clerk will half kill himself with work in order to finish a report on time. A commercial artist will sit up all night to make a dead-line. A damn street cleaner will risk his neck in traffic in order to sweep up three lousy ounces of manure. We're conditioned to do our jobs, whatever they are, and we can't live with ourselves if we funk. So let's not argue it, Bree. You'd do the same thing, and I wouldn't have any right to object."

She bent down and kissed him again. When she sat up, her eyes were wet, but she was smiling. "How does Aaron come into it?" she asked.

"He was in New Orleans last week. I don't know why. He saw Milly and Pritchard on Sunday afternoon. I don't know what they spoke about, or even whether it was important. But Aaron, through the Masterson office down here, had Pritchard kidnaped from the hospital and then faked his death, by suicide, over the bridge. Or at least, I hope the death was faked. I want you to do something for me this evening, Bree."

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"What?"

"I want to see Sis, and I want to see her alone. I'll wait in a cab, at Lee Circle near the library end. Pick her up after her performance this evening and make sure you're not followed. Be mysterious. Work on her imagination and be as vague as you can. Drive around through the park and switch out your lights and hint at anything you want. Then drive over to Lee Circle, drop her near my parked taxi and then keep going."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"If Pritchard was murdered, it is. But in any case, Sis has the key to the whole business. If I walked into her room now, I wouldn't be able to get a damn thing out of her. But with the proper build-up, I think she'll tell me about Jeremy Keyser."

"Then you know he's alive?"

"I don't know. I don't even know that he was alive Sunday night, but — I think so."

Gabrielle got up and turned off the water. When she came back, she said, "This is going to be hard on Sis. She's in love with Aaron, and she hates her uncle, and now Aaron is going against everything she values. She's going to need a lot of sympathy."

"Suppose, Bree, that Aaron turned out to be Jeremy Keyser."

"Aaron — Jeremy? Oh Carl, how can you? It's unthinkable — it couldn't be that!"

"Naturally. And it couldn't be Pritchard because Jeremy wasn't a dentist, and it couldn't be Benning because he has an alibi and it couldn't be Ollie because he's married. Which leaves the stumble-bum, who couldn't have killed himself."

"Why are you so sure about Jeremy?"

"Everything points to it. Milly took Sonny and Sis out of school for a definite reason, and she practically told them what the reason was. To meet a father. And yet, she said she wasn't going to get married. Answer — Jeremy. Pritchard's fear and his running away is explainable in only one way. Jeremy and the insurance fraud. Why was Sis so terribly upset, and why did Sonny and Sis behave so strangely when they first heard the news? Why did Masterson rush down here? What was Aaron's errand last week? Why did Milly write Jeremy's name in her datebook? What was the meaning of Milly's last words? 'Call me —' something. Call me what? Some pet name that Jeremy used to use. Who could wound Milly and then be pretty sure she wouldn't give him away? Why would anybody want her in a hospital for just a little while? Jeremy, whose children had been poisoned against him. Think of meeting them at Milly's sick bed. All that sentimentality, all that emotional drama to help him — that would be the ideal way for Jeremy to get back to his family, wouldn't it? And Milly would know it, too, and she wouldn't accuse. Because remember what Poldi said — that Milly was still in love with him. You see? Find me another explanation of all those things and I'll drop the Jeremy theory like a hot potato. Which it is, anyhow. I think I'll take my bath and get going."

Vague, hazy, indefinite. Carl was bothered by the fact that all his evidence was guesswork. He had proof of the murder method, and the method practically clinched the motive by showing the intention had been to wound rather than kill. And there was no doubt that Pritchard and Aaron

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were up to their ears in a quagmire of evasion. But proof? Facts? They were simply non-existent. Carl's only hope was to find the right man at the right time, and batter him into a confession with the sheer weight of inferences.

Which was a hell of a phrase. Milly's killer wasn't going to break down and cry when Carl tackled him with a hypothesis. Carl's chances were about as good as trying to beat a rhinoceros into insensibility with a feather quill. Still, if you stuck it up the proper nostril, the rhinoceros might get annoyed. And butt.

Carl didn't want to get butted. He wanted to solve a murder case, and he had thirteen hours in which to do it.

He and Gabrielle dined at Michel's, as a sort of celebration. She was in high spirits, and at first he wondered whether she realized what he was up against. But over the pint of champagne, she said, "Carlo, you're not really leaving tomorrow, are you?"

"Of course not."

"That's what I thought. You'll have to hide out, won't you? Have you thought where?"

"No. Some out of the way dump, or maybe a tourist joint. You'll still be at the hotel and I'll get in touch, if necessary."

"I'll see what I can do with Aaron. And Masterson."

That was her only reference to the danger that hung over Carl. He kissed her good night under the big electric sign, turned and walked off. He didn't look back.

Around nine o'clock he walked into a small bar about a block from Benning's Den. He ordered a beer, sipped it leisurely and looked around. A boy in the corner perked up and came over with his shoe-cleaning box. "Shine, Mister?"

"No. But if you'd like to make a few cents, you can deliver a note for me." Carl scribbled on a piece of paper and folded it. "Know The Den, on the next block? Take this over and have it delivered to Miss Trevis, the dancer. Wait for her, and then bring her back here."

Carl moved over to a booth. Somebody put a nickel in the record-player and it blared out a sharp, tinny tune. A few customers were gathered around the pin ball game. The click of the lever and a high, boisterous laugh smashed through the sound of the music. The boy came back with Linda Trevis.

She sat down opposite him in the booth. She had almost no make-up on and her face seemed white and drawn. Her black eyes gleamed with a hard incandescence. He was glad he didn't have to see her dance this evening.

Carl wasted no words. "I know you haven't much time," he said. "You hinted the other day that Benning had something on you. What?"

"I certainly managed to give you the wrong impression," she said. "I just wanted to make him jealous, and you happened to be handy."

"Why did you want to make him jealous?"

"I told you the other day. I'm not well. My work is too exhausting. I was afraid to go to the doctor, because if he ever told me to quit dancing, there wouldn't be much left."

"And now?"

"I'd have hated you if you'd gotten any ideas the other night," she said. "Lots of men would have. But I was just playing you for a sucker."

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"I know that."

"Then maybe you can understand. When a woman gives in to a man and lets him mean too much, she's through. She's a sort of slave. At first, she's willing to take anything; later on, she gets so that she practically asks for it. I made that mistake with Arthur. Then, when I got to worrying what he'd do when I had to stop dancing, I made up my mind I'd make him marry me. So — I got him jealous and it worked. He's going to marry me at last. And whether you know it or not, you did me quite a little favor."

"Always glad to help out," said Carl. He glanced at his watch. "Linda, do you remember last Sunday night? You finish your act around quarter to ten, don't you? Where were you at ten?"

Her black eyes seemed to burn. Carl, Sis, the night club, the patrons — all things that reached her consciousness were only real in so far as they affected her relations with Benning. There was no way of touching her except through Benning.

Carl said quietly. "You go into Benning's apartment sometimes. Were you there around ten, last Sunday?"

"Yes," she answered. Her voice was low and her lips were barely moving.

"Was Benning there?"

Again she hesitated. "I just looked in for a moment. He was taking a bath."

"You actually saw him? Did he speak to you?"

"No, but the water was running."

"Did you notice the doors of his apartment?" asked Carl.

She smiled slowly. "Well, they were there. I don't know what else you mean."

She shook hands with him. She walked away with a long, free stride.

Carl waited about five minutes before leaving the bar. Perhaps he should have looked. Perhaps he should have known that the world wouldn't stand still until Masterson arrived. At any rate, Carl was walking leisurely in the opposite direction from The Den. The shot cracked out suddenly. He heard the whine and slap of the bullet, and his trouser cuff flapped up. He jumped, ducked and dashed for the corner. The second shot was nowhere near him. He rounded the building and slowed up.

He walked about ten paces and then glanced at his trousers. The bullet had torn through the material just above the cuff and left a pair of small, ragged holes.

He heard shouts behind him and he kept on walking. The police wouldn't shoot at him on the street. But somebody had.

He reached the end of the street and started to circle the square block. The lowness of the shot was a tip-off. Somebody who wasn't used to that gun. Somebody who hadn't realized it fired low. Somebody who hadn't had the time or the opportunity to test it.

Carl completed his circle and saw the small crowd standing around the cop. The cop was taking notes on a pad and a man was talking.

"I saw the guy. Over there. He whips up the gun and fires twice, and then he turns around and beats it. I heard a cab start off, so I guess that's how he got away. I wasn't close to him and didn't see him good. But he was kind of dark and thin, and he had on a dark hat and a gray coat."

Carl turned and walked off. A dark thin man, with a dark hat and a gray coat.

Aaron.

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18: THE LITTLE RED HERRING

CARL LEANED BACK in the corner of the cab and smoked slowly. His long legs were stretched out, his collar was turned up and his eyes were half closed. Indifferently, he glanced at the bullet hole in his trousers. Tonight he could still sit in a taxi and watch cars swing past and head up St. Charles. Good, comfortable people riding in good, comfortable cars to the security of their homes. Tomorrow he'd be an outcast, ducking into corners every time he saw a cop and afraid to ride in a taxi for fear the driver had seen a handbill containing the picture of a man and beneath it the words WANTED FOR MURDER: CARL WAYWARD.

The driver turned around and said affably, "I don't know why the hell I waste my time sitting here and doing nothing. I can't read. I can't talk. I can't even occupy my mind. What's in it for me, huh? A few lousy cents?"

Carl didn't answer. A trolley clanged past and a distant chime beat out the quarter hour. The tall column of the Lee monument pointed upward to where the frame of the window sliced it off, without a top and without purpose. The flower patches at the base were dull gray and sooty pink in the narrow spectrum of electric lights. Carl's tension had worn off and left him with a moody foreboding.

The driver said, "I could tell you things about this town, Mister, but you don't want to listen. I'm bored."

Carl studied the grassy embankment below the library. He had a combination chauffeur-Scheherazade trying to beguile him into animation. It couldn't be done. He wished Sis would never show up. He wished he could sit here the whole night long, with his collar turned up and a smoldering cigarette in his fingers. He wished there were some way of explaining Aaron without calling him a rat. But there wasn't. And so the world was temporarily dreary and empty. Even thinking of Gabrielle didn't help.

The driver said, "I'll give you just fifteen minutes, Mister, and if you don't come out of it, then you got to sulk in some other fella's cab."

The fight at Pritchard's had been all right. That, at least, had been in the open. A curious understanding had persisted, and Aaron had claimed he'd deliberately kept from marking up Carl's face. Well, maybe. A perverted hangover of friendship. And then Aaron had shot at him. What was the answer?

Brakes squealed and a black convertible stopped ten feet from the cab. A girl's slight figure darted out and Carl flung open the door. Gabrielle's voice called gaily, and Sis jumped into the cab. Then the convertible's gears ground and it shot forward and swung to circle the monument.

Carl said, "All right, buddy — just drive us around." He slid the glass partition shut and turned to Sis.

She was gazing at him, her eyes big and limpid and worried, and she was breathing rapidly, with excitement. "I'm here," she whispered. "What is it? Why all the secrecy? What happened?"

"Sis," said Carl, "I've got to see

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Walter Pritchard."

She turned her head in a quick, startled movement. "But — why ask me? How would I know? They're dragging the river for him, aren't they?"

"I wouldn't do this if it weren't a matter of life and death to me," said Carl. "That sounds funny, doesn't it? But it's true."

"How?" she asked faintly. "Please — I don't understand."

"You're better off if you don't. I've always been on your side. Yours and Sonny's. Gabrielle and I have watched you cover five years of growth in the space of one week, and we haven't interfered. We thought it was better that way. We don't want thanks, but you ought to know you can trust us."

"Of course I do. You've been splendid. And Bree's a sort of fairy godmother. That's what I call her behind her back."

Carl smiled. "Thanks, Sis, but let's get down to facts. You know your Uncle Albert is due here in the morning, don't you?"

"Aaron sent for him, on business."

"That's why I have to see Pritchard. Pritchard was in love with your mother. Had been for years. And he transferred his affection over to you and Sonny. I suspect he was in touch with you as long ago as last Monday, and that you've seen him more than once. And I'm pretty sure he's been in touch with you today."

Sis didn't speak. Her lower lip began to tremble and the tears gathered in her eyes.

"You see," continued Carl, "there are a lot of things I know and haven't mentioned. And I'm not bragging when I say that if it hadn't been for you, I might have solved this case. All I had to do was to tell Crowder to arrest you and get the truth."

"About Pritchard?"

"Yes. And about Jeremy Keyser."

Sis said, "Oh!" as if she were hurt. Then she leaned back and stared into space. Carl felt like a hypocrite. Throwing past favors in her face, drawing out her heart strings as far as they'd stretch. Then he thought of what he faced tomorrow and his feelings got all mixed up. Self-protection and sympathy for Sis and the desire to shield her and the realization that he could use her because she was soft and he wasn't.

"You see," he said, "after I met Pritchard and found out that he was just a sensitive little guy who was frightened and upset and dominated by his long, one-sided romance, I saw that you had to come into the picture, too. You persuaded him to come out of hiding and to phone me at the hotel. It couldn't have been anyone else. At first, I didn't know why you'd done it and I didn't see just what there was between you. Milly, of course, but she wasn't enough. The present and the future had to enter into it, too. Now I know. Everything you've done since the moment I walked into your room Sunday night was dominated by a single purpose. To protect your father. Jeremy Keyser."

The partition shot back and the driver turned around and called, "Hey, Mister — you want I should drive you through the park?"

"No. Just keep to the main street, and away from the heart of the town."

"It beats me why you want to waste your dough this way, Mister."

"Don't worry about that," said Carl. "Just roll."

"Look," said the driver. "Maybe you

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think you're giving me a break or else you figure you're making money circulate, just driving around, but the cab company belongs to a lot of big shots and they don't need your dough. You use up gasoline, sure, but the oil companies are doing all right. So what do you accomplish, huh?"

"I get fun, and you get a tip," said Carl. He leaned forward and slammed the partition shut. The driver started with a deliberately savage jerk and Carl bounced back into the cushions.

Sis smiled wanly, to show that she appreciated the humor of it. Carl patted her arm lightly. He wanted to grab her and bring her back to Sonny and tell the pair of them to get out of town and forget Aaron and Carl and AJ and all that had happened in New Orleans, and to get back to school as fast as they could and bury themselves in their books. They weren't ready for this sort of thing. They were too young. All they had to do was run away, and nobody would follow.

"Why are you telling me this, Carl?"

"Because I have to see Pritchard. Because I need all the information I can possibly get. Because a lot of things have happened this past week. You've grown up. You have a job and somebody in love with you and maybe you're going to get married. You're not a child any more. This is something you have to figure out all by yourself. You're through with chocolate sundaes at the corner drugstore. Where you are now, they serve liquor straight, and if you can't take it, you're just lost."

"I don't know how you found out about Daddy," she said slowly. "I wanted so much to see him and hear him say he'd always loved M'ma and he'd had nothing to do with this and he just wanted to come back to Sonny and me and —" She sobbed then and buried her head in Carl's coat. "Carl — Carl!" she cried. "It's too late now. It can't happen any more. He's dead!"

"Who?" asked Carl, with his arm around her. "Who?"

"The man you saw in the courtyard that night. The one I said I wanted to see ahead of the police. You called him a stumble-bum."

"In that case," said Carl, "you have nothing to fear from Pritchard, and my business with him doesn't particularly concern Jeremy, anyhow. So let's go. Where is he, Sis?"

He raised her face and smiled, because he knew then that he'd won.

"D'Harcourt Street, off Canal," she said.

The driver pushed back the window and said, "Yeah. D'Harcourt. It's about time, Mister."

The taxi rolled swiftly through the semi-dark streets. It wasn't midnight yet, but few of the house windows showed lights. Carl knew that he couldn't hold Pritchard or even tie him down with promises, but so long as Pritchard was at large and Carl knew his whereabouts, Carl would hold the ace-card in the coming struggle with Masterson.

"You'll keep Pritchard's address to yourself, won't you?" said Carl. "You won't tell it to AJ, of course. And not a to Aaron, either."

"Anything you say. If it's a matter of your safety —"

"It is. And telling Aaron would merely put him on the spot. He'd either have to doublecross AJ, or else sell me down the river."

"Whatever you say, Carl. Nothing

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matters very much to me, any more."

"You knew about Jeremy from the beginning, didn't you?"

"Practically. I guessed M'ma was going to see him, and then when you said she'd been killed, I thought Daddy had done it. That's why I was so upset. I wanted to die."

Carl remembered Sis's suicide threat the morning he'd had breakfast with her. He recalled how she'd torn up the datebook with Jeremy's name in it. There was no doubt that Carl finally had one of the main clues to the story.

But — *who had killed the stumblebum?*

Pritchard answered the bell of the rooming house on d'Harcourt Street. He showed no surprise at his visitors.

"Oh, hello," he said. "Come in, won't you? I'm so glad to have visitors. I've been lonely, and all I do is drink tea. I have a gas burner and I bought some tea balls at the nearest grocer, and I've been drinking tea all evening long."

He led them to a large parlor room at the rear of the house. Carl sat down and was glad of the interval during which Pritchard boiled water and set out the three cups.

"My larynx was bruised," the dentist said. His voice had a trace of hoarseness. "The heat seems to help it."

Carl sipped his tea slowly. "I can tell you most of the story," he said, "but I'd like to hear it in your own words. From the time of Jeremy's accident. You faked the dental chart, didn't you?"

Sis said, "You can trust Carl. I'd like to know it all, too. You only gave it to me in pieces."

"But Wayward — he's the police."

Sis shook her head. "Not really. And we made a bargain before we came here. He won't tell. Honestly, he won't."

Pritchard glanced dolefully at Carl. Apparently it didn't make any great difference to Pritchard, and he was glad to talk.

"I don't know how you found out that Jeremy was alive," he said. "I was a friend of his from way back, and he stopped off to see me here about ten years ago. He was in a very bad condition. He wanted to go back to Milly and he wanted to see his children, but he was broke and ashamed to return. His morale was at low ebb, and even though he'd had a letter from Poldi — he hadn't met her, you know, but she'd written. Even though he had the letter saying Milly wanted him back, he was afraid. He thought the old round would start again. Masterson's money supporting them and making Jeremy a parasite in his own house. He kept saying that the only way he could ever regain his self-respect was to return in prosperity, to dump money in Milly's lap and become independent of Masterson.

"Poor Jeremy. He was a melancholic man." The dentist shook his head sadly. The man, the room, the story seemed tinged with a gray, hopeless quality. "He just couldn't make money. He had an inferiority complex and didn't even know how to go out and get a job. I finally told him I knew someone in Florida who could put him into a rather good thing. He agreed to let me drive him over there, try it for six months and then, if he made good, to go back to Milly.

"We picked somebody up on the road. There'd been some hitch-hiker robberies that year and there was a law against picking people up. I didn't

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think of it at the time. Then came the accident. A cow crossing the road. I was going fast. I jammed on my brakes, skidded, and the next thing I knew I was lying in the sand and the car was burning fiercely.

"I picked myself up. Jeremy had been thrown clear and he, too, hadn't been badly hurt. But the hitch-hiker — he'd been caught in there. I had visions of a big damage suit and maybe even a prosecution on a criminal charge. I was worried about my practice, and Jeremy kept muttering that this was the hand of providence. That now he could break free and not bother Milly any more. Ever. If he was dead, she'd forget him.

"It was a lonely road and no one came along for quite a while. I wouldn't have done it, normally, but the shock of the accident had unbalanced me a little, and there was the dead man in the car. So finally I said all right. I'd say Jeremy had been killed. The dead man was the same build as Jeremy, he was burnt beyond recognition, and Jeremy dragged him from the car and put the wedding ring next to him and then told me to make a sketch of his teeth and enter it in my records. That would clinch the proof."

Pritchard rose and refilled the three cups. "I hated to admit the dental work was mine. There was an amalgam filling on the mesial surface of one of the bicuspids that a garage mechanic could have improved on, and a gold crown that made me shudder. But Jeremy was insistent, for the first time in his life. He seemed to have new hope and confidence. And, as I said, I wasn't thinking normally. So Jeremy walked off to a new life, and I waited there and reported his death. And proved it. I met Milly when she came south. She was a lovely woman. I'd have told her the truth, except that it was too late. I felt so sorry for her. I decided that for the rest of my life I'd try to make up for my deceit. I didn't think that part of it would be paying Jeremy a hundred dollars a month, because I'd conspired to defraud the insurance company.

"As for Milly — perhaps, in the early days, I might have persuaded her to become my wife. But I knew it would be bigamy and that Jeremy would take advantage of it. He'd grown hard and bitter, after the accident."

Then Jeremy *had* killed Milly. Or was there some new, unsuspected angle? Or had Pritchard himself — Pritchard who'd been paying blackmail so long, and who alone knew that Milly was still married and her husband alive —

But that made it too complicated, and Carl didn't want to conduct a murder clinic and dissect Sis's parents with Sis for an audience.

He said quickly, "And how'd you get out of the hospital? How was the accident faked on the bridge?"

"I was quite surprised," said Pritchard. "After the doctor left, the cop who was sitting there handed me the key and told me to get dressed and get out of the hospital as fast as I could. Then he walked out of the room and — well, I simply took the elevator downstairs and went out the main entrance. A man was waiting for me. I'd never seen him before."

"Ritter," muttered Carl. Ritter, whom Aaron had phoned at the Masterson office.

"He brought me to a couple of other

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men and said, 'This is Pritchard. You know what to do.' I was scared. They looked like gunmen and I was afraid they were going to kill me. They took me to my house and told me to get my car and drive out to the bridge. They followed me. I stopped once for gas. I had no idea what it was all about. On the bridge, they transferred me to their car, and then one of them drove it though the guard rail and jumped out just in time. He was very agile."

"Pritchard," said Carl, "there's just one promise I want from you. Will you, when and if it becomes necessary, testify as to the identity of the man who met you outside the hospital and as to the death hoax on the bridge?"

"Certainly, since it's the truth. But I don't know the man's name."

"Any time you want to see him," remarked Carl, "just look up Masterson and Company in the phone book, and then go there and ask for Mr. Ritter. He bribed the cop and hired the men who took you to the bridge. And obviously — very obviously, in the case of a move of that magnitude — he was acting on direct orders from Masterson."

"But why? What for? Why did they want me out of the hospital?"

Carl could have answered that. Because Pritchard could involve Aaron, and Aaron was Masterson's man. But Sis was in love with Aaron and Carl could say nothing against him. Besides, everything depended on Pritchard's good will.

"I don't know why," said Carl. "There are a lot of things I don't know, and the most important question of all is, who is Jeremy?"

Sis's knees banged the table, and the three teacups hopped and spilt on the cloth. "I told you!" she cried. "Kelly. The little stumble-bum! Walter, tell him who he was! M'ma was killed and then Daddy was killed just when I found him, and all you do is ask horrible questions. Do something, Carl — do something!"

Pritchard put his hand on Sis's shoulder. "You mustn't get upset, my dear. It's been very difficult and you should have been in bed hours ago. You need sleep. Please take her home, Wayward." And then, as an afterthought, "That's what I was about to tell you last night, you know. That Jeremy was the stumble-bum."

Well, was he?

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19: PAPA KILL MAMMA, PLEASE

OLLIE'S STUDIO had everything except heat. The room was vast and spanned with heavy crossbeams. On two sides the walls sloped outward. A pair of wide dormer windows broke one of the walls and formed a pair of alcoves where Ollie worked. The rest of the room was littered with chairs, tables, an old couch, the bed on which Carl had slept, books, piles of magazines, dusty trunks, a stuffed owl, a battered globe, heavy wooden chests, a hat-rack, a cabinet radio that didn't work, easels, canvases, tin boxes, buckets, damaged lamps and the shell of a mantelpiece painted in imitation marble.

Carl sat in front of the miniature gas heater in one corner and watched Ollie clear an alcove by shoving its contents to the opposite side of the room. From downstairs, Poldi's voice resounded clearly along the pipeline.

"Mr. Huntington's hungry again. He has one of his spells and I think I'll get him another breakfast."

The answer was too far away to distinguish. "Whom is she talking to?" asked Carl.

"Zazu Big-Feet," replied Ollie in his low, hesitant voice. "The maid. We call her that because she has falling arches and spreading soles. Her arches have been falling steadily ever since she was a child. You'd think they'd stop, but they don't. Her feet just keep on spreading." Ollie picked up a plaster face and held it at varying angles to the light.

"Know who it is?"

Carl rose and crossed the room. "Milly," he said. "Looks like a death mask."

"It is. Had a hell of a time getting permission to make it, too. I wanted to commemorate her in some way, because she represented something very special in my life. I haven't done much modeling lately, but I thought I'd do a bust of Milly. White and shining."

He was holding the mask about a foot away from him, at eye level. His head moved forward slowly and Carl had the hideous premonition that Ollie was about to kiss the plaster lips.

Carl reached out and grabbed the mask roughly. "Let's see it," he said.

The texture of the plaster was delicate and showed minute details, the wrinkled tracery of the lips, the barely perceptible lines across the brow. Even the individual pores had left their slight marks in the plaster.

"Too detailed," said Ollie. "I'll just use it to copy from. Here — help me push my table over to the light."

An object a couple of feet high stood on the table and was draped with two or three old shirts. "Slide it gently," said Ollie. "That's the frame for the bust. I cover it with clay and then build it up. Gently, now."

Something clinked as the table started to move, but it reached the alcove without mishap. Ollie rubbed his hands and stared at the old shirts. Then Poldi entered with a covered tray. She was wearing a pink silk negligee with frills of lace and delicate little flower buds. She smiled.

"Hello, Pussycat," she said. "I

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brought up some breakfast."

"Thanks. But why bother dragging it up here?"

Poldi set the tray down with a bang. "Listen, my cute little Sherlock. When you drag me out of bed at one in the morning and come begging for asylum, I'm not going to exhibit you to Zazu Big-Feet the first thing in the morning. She'd go gossiping about how the wacky Mrs. Huntington had got herself another man because the first one wasn't good enough, which is probably true, but that would bring the police by lunch time. So you're staying here. The studio hasn't been cleaned in three years and it's not going to get cleaned for another three, and you're safe as long as you don't go through that door. That one, where I just came in. The other one goes to the bathroom and you can open it whenever you're in the mood."

"Mood has nothing to do with it," observed Ollie. "Moods are mental."

"All the better reason for Carl. He's mental as hell. Are you going to amuse him this morning or are you working?"

"I thought I'd start on that bust of Milly."

"Oh." She headed for the table. Ollie blocked the way. She tapped her foot and drew a deep breath. Ollie stepped aside and she sailed past him and pulled at the old shirts. Underneath, nestled snugly against the uprights of the frame, were a pair of whisky bottles.

Poldi picked them up. "The trouble with you," she said angrily, "is that you think your genius is all bottled up and you expect to drink it back. I'm going to get dressed. And Carl had better keep you sober or I'll throw him to the police." She creaked out and left the studio.

Carl stirred his coffee. Ollie shrugged. "That's the way the money goes," he remarked. "I have to buy about three bottles for every one that I get to drink." He walked to the discarded radio cabinet, removed the top and reached inside. His hand came up with a fresh quart. He took a small glass from his pocket, set it down next to Carl's tray and said, "Have one?"

"No thanks. Later on, maybe."

"Best time to drink is when you get up. You're fresh and full of energy and you can enjoy it." He took two drinks and replaced the bottle in its cache.

Carl watched Ollie work. He slapped clay on the wooden frame and fashioned it into a rough semblance of a head and bust. He worked slowly and with a sure, firm touch. Occasionally he spoke.

"I don't see why you hang around town, Carl. Milly's gone, and you can't bring her back to life. What's the difference whether you ever get her murderer or not?"

"Plenty."

"You want to make a name for yourself. You can't bear the thought of trying something and not succeeding. Well, here you are hiding out from the police. You risk getting crippled and you risk Poldi's safety and mine. Is it worth it?"

"I explained last night, Ollie, that you were perfectly free to —"

"Oh, don't bring that up. We're glad to do it, Poldi because she's big-hearted and me because I like doing what I'm not supposed to. Besides, you could have thrown Poldi in jail and you didn't, so we owe you one. Can't I talk facts without your getting emotional and wanting to bring up that slop about

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gratitude? So — why do you take these chances? You're not the adventurous type. You're almost sane, as people go."

"If this were just a matter of bringing a man to justice," said Carl thoughtfully, "balanced against personal disadvantages, I think I'd play safe and beat it. But I'm a psychologist, Ollie, and I look at things differently. At the psychic traumas and the mental wounds, and the therapy they may require. That's my real interest, and I have a job to do."

"Talk English," said Ollie.

"Here's an opportunity to save a normal, useful human being. But to do it, I have to solve a murder. If I fail, somebody goes through life with a mental fixation built around this murder situation. Years from now, it means a neurotic personality and maybe a nervous crack-up, and certainly all kinds of unhappiness."

Ollie picked up the death mask, examined it and replaced it at a different angle. "Who?" he said.

"Sis. When I first met her, she was a spontaneous little animal trying to marry off her mother and get a father out of it. She even sounded me out on the subject. She had a sort of refrain running through her head. 'Daddy was a stinker.' And she wanted to find a daddy who wasn't. You can only explain her within the pattern of the Oedipus complex. The infantile father-love. The desire to replace her mother. Everybody has it, of course, but with Sis — socko! It happened."

"What happened?"

"Her unconscious dream came true. Her father killed her mother, and Sis knew damn well that she herself was involved."

Ollie slapped a wad of clay at the bust and turned around. "Explain it to a layman, Carl. To a man who doesn't believe in Freud and incest."

"Don't worry about words, Ollie. We really need a new vocabulary to describe the things that Freud uncovered. The kind of incest he means is simply an emotional attachment, and the child is completely unaware of its implications. In the usual sense, and certainly in the conscious sense, it isn't even sexual. Daughter loves father and idealizes him all her life. Perfectly commonplace. Sis lacked a father and sought somebody to take his place. And then murder stripped her down to her unconscious and laid bare the basic pattern."

"Meaning?"

"Well, if you wished somebody were dead, and five minutes later he was flattened by a steamroller, you'd have feelings of guilt, wouldn't you? However unfounded. Now suppose you just dreamt somebody was dead, without ever formulating the wish, and again it happened. Your unconscious had expressed itself while you were asleep. You'd still feel guilt, wouldn't you? Well, that's the way Sis felt when the old, unconscious dream of infanthood came true."

"What did she have against her mother?"

"In the top of her mind, nothing. In the bottom of it, behind closed doors, jealousy. A mature woman and a young, sensitive daughter — you've often seen it. A playful rivalry for the affections of the father, or some other man."

"There wasn't any father around."

"Exactly. Milly had deprived her of a father. Sis didn't like that, did she? And whose fault was it? Don't you suppose she was bothered even a little bit?"

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Here her mother had cut loose from her father and kept calling him a stinker. What kind of a child could take it in stride? Accepting the situation without resentment — that would really be abnormal."

"But on your own words, Sis wasn't aware of her own motives."

"Right. And therefore was unaware of the powerful significance of what she did. The morning after the murder, for instance, while Sonny went to the police, Sis dressed up in her mother's clothes and then threatened suicide."

"But she didn't commit suicide and probably never intended to. So what?"

"Accept my analysis and call the unconscious a piece of fiction that works, and I'll show it to you in terms of effect. Sis feels a share of the guilt and behaves accordingly, which is at all costs to protect her father from the consequences of his crime."

"Why? What did she do about it?"

"The clothes, the suicide threat that I just told you about. Then she destroyed valuable evidence — a datebook with Jeremy's name in it. Next, she concealed Pritchard's whereabouts. And finally, in concert with him, she planned to frame the stumble-bum for murder. That's some going, for a seventeen-year-old. And last night, she actually told me the stumble-bum was Jeremy and I almost believed it."

"Maybe he was."

"Nonsense! Because then who killed Jeremy? Besides, I'm betting on my analysis, and if it's correct she would never accuse the real Jeremy. It's the one thing she could never do, because it would be like accusing herself."

"I think I'll go back to Milly," remarked Ollie, picking up a handful of clay. "She's simpler. Sis strikes me as mad, anyhow. She's a nice girl, but she's too emotional. I get enough emotion from Poldi and I like everybody else to be tranquil. And thin. Sis is explosive."

"Sure she is. That's what I've been telling you. She's been hell-bent on protecting Jeremy. And yet, knowing he's a murderer, she can't actually love him no matter how much she wants to, so she keeps transferring her father-love to every older man she meets, primarily to Aaron. That was why she literally flung herself into his arms that evening at the night club. You weren't there, Ollie, but it was terrific and you can't account for it in any other way. So she made a father out of Aaron, another one out of me, still another out of Pritchard and finally a fourth out of Benning, who protected her and gave her a job."

"Don't leave me out," said Ollie. "I want to be a father, too."

"Go ahead. It may make you a candidate for the chair, but don't let that bother you. Poldi'd get you out, somehow."

Ollie wiped his hands, walked over to the radio cabinet and poured himself a drink. "Carl, if you don't know who Jeremy is, and if all you say is true, why not simply study Sis's behavior and get the clue from her?"

"If I'd caught on to the Jeremy angle at the beginning, I could have done just that. But now — she's built up too many complications with everybody. The relationships are clouded and mixed up with outside factors. And besides, I think I know who Jeremy is."

"Who?"

"I'd like to hold the answer to that one, Ollie, until the time's ripe."

"You shoot your mouth off too much," remarked Ollie placidly, and

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resumed his work.

Poldi returned about a half hour later with the news that she'd been to the hotel and seen White standing guard in the lobby, and that Sis was due shortly on a visit to Poldi. Carl drew up a chair near the listening pole and set out another for Ollie. Ollie brought the bottle from the radio cabinet.

"De luxe detection," remarked Carl. He lit a cigarette, made himself comfortable and waited.

About a half hour later the bell rang. Presently the door opened and Poldi's voice said, "Sis. Come on in."

"Oh, Poldi, I'm so glad to get away. I want to stay here, Poldi. I won't go back to the hotel again. I simply won't. You were M'ma's best friend — let me stay here. I won't be any trouble. I can sleep on the couch or up in Ollie's studio or anywhere. I won't get in your way — really I won't."

Carl and Ollie exchanged glances. Poldi's voice said, "Sis dear, of course you can stay. But what are you so upset about? What's happened?"

"Everything," she wailed. "Oh, Poldi — I'm so unhappy!"

The sound of weeping floated up, and then Poldi's voice murmuring gently. After a while Sis said, "Uncle Albert. He's here again. He's simply horrible. I hate him."

"You always did, but you never got excited before. You made nice wisecracks and put him in his place. You and Sonny. Uncle Albert never threw you before."

"Well, he did this time. He said he was going to have Carl arrested and accused of murder and the police are looking for him now. Then Sonny said it was just like Uncle Albert to try and throw the blame on an innocent man and maybe Uncle Albert had killed M'ma, and Uncle Albert got angry and called Sonny an interfering little fool and Sonny hit him and Uncle Albert is going to send both of us back to school."

"The old gold-bag said that before and it didn't bother you. What's really wrong, Sis?"

"I told you. Don't ask me questions. You're as bad as the rest of them. Oh, Poldi — I wish I were dead!"

"Was Aaron there, at the interview?"

"I hate Aaron. Don't talk about him. He sent for Uncle Albert and he didn't even defend Carl or Sonny or me. He just stood there and took in everything and he's on Uncle Albert's side. Simply because Uncle Albert pays him a salary. I hate him."

"Aaron's pretty fond of you, Sis."

"He isn't. He's been pretending all the time, or he couldn't go over to Uncle Albert's side. And when I think of all the things I told him and — you're on his side, too! You're sticking up for Aaron and you're against me. But I know where I can go, and I'm going, too."

"Where?"

"Linda's. She told me that any time I was in trouble, she'd help. I'm going there. Let me go, Poldi. *Let me go!*"

Her voice screamed and Carl heard the sound of slapping and then Sis's shrieks turned into a steady, hysterical sobbing. Carl turned to Ollie. "Well?"

Ollie poured himself a drink. "She's too damned emotional," he said. He rose and picked up the death mask and, though his expression was detached, he stroked the plaster cheeks with soft, caressing fingers.

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20: FIFTY MILLION DOLLARS CAN'T BE WRONG

FOR THE TIME BEING, Sis was resting in Poldi's room and was under strict orders not to enter the studio. Ollie was still hard at work, but his chief difficulty consisted in making one bottle last a whole day. Carl sat around and watched. He had decided not to leave until evening, when darkness would lessen the chances of his being seen.

Poldi brought up a lunch tray and Carl and Ollie divided it. Carl was having his turn at the solitary coffee cup when the bell rang downstairs. He gulped the rest of the coffee and took up his station at the pipeline. He heard Poldi's heavy step march to the door, fling it open and exclaim sharply, "Well! What do *you* want?"

Aaron's voice answered, "Sis."

There was a moment's silence before Poldi said, "Come in." Her tone had a touch of grimness. "Sis doesn't want to talk to you," she said, "but I do. Mr. Bettner, you're a low-down skunk without backbone or morals or principles. A horse wouldn't use you for a doormat and a rat wouldn't gnaw you for fear of getting corrupted or catching hardening of the arteries. You're a walking rubber stamp trying to imitate an obscene, venomous, slave-driving old man by the name of Masterson. Shut up and let me finish. I've got something on my chest, and by jingo! I'm not going to let you interrupt a lady. You're lower than a mole and slimier than a watersnake and colder than a fish, and if you broke a leg walking out of my door I'd call up the street-cleaning department instead of a doctor. That's all, and now you can get the hell out of here!"

"Smoke?" asked Aaron pleasantly.

Poldi's voice hissed with anger. "Get out of here before you make me mad!"

"I have something to say, too," said Aaron, "and I think you'll listen more carefully than I did to you. First of all, you can tell Sis that I love her, but I didn't realize how much until after she'd left. You see, I always considered myself intelligent, and I figured it was stupid to give up a good job just for the sake of abstract morality. And I still think so. But it's a lot stupider to give up a girl like Sis, and I can't have both. So I had it out with AJ, and the only thing he's undecided about is whether to frame Carl for murder or to forget Carl and concentrate on me."

"If I could believe that!" said Poldi slowly.

"I don't give a damn whether you do or not. I merely want you to repeat it to Sis. And the next thing I have to say concerns Carl. I think he'll get in touch with you some time or other — if he hasn't already — so tell him the last time I saw him, I thought he was walking off to get killed. I know AJ a little better than most people, and he's ruthless. But I couldn't see why I should risk my pay-check and turn nursemaid for a Ph.D. with kindergarten ideals. All I was bothering about was how to get myself out of the mess. It was a case of Marshal Aaron Petain facing a situation. A good bargain if possible; otherwise, a lousy bargain and the hell with anybody else. The idea was to keep on

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living, with or without glory.

"It was a little crude, though. A little too close to murdering Carl, and he didn't seem to realize the extent of his danger. I wanted to impress him with the seriousness of it, so I took a potshot at him on the street. If I hit him, fine. He'd go to a hospital and be safe, with nothing worse than a leg wound. If I missed, that was all right, too. At least he'd get scared. He's probably worried about that shot, so just tell him it was a friendly farewell. And now, since you asked me to go, I will. And anything apologetic that I've said does not include you."

The door slammed. Ollie murmured, "He put Poldi in her place nicely. Very nicely." Carl got up, walked to the window and flung it open.

"Aaron!" he yelled. "Aaron — come on back!"

Ollie muttered, "You're a fool. Let your emotions run away with you. How do you know he isn't putting on an act?"

"I don't," retorted Carl. "But I'd rather bet on a man than against him."

When Carl entered the living room, Aaron was lighting a cigarette for Poldi and Poldi was puffing on it and glaring at him.

"The big bad man," she said, "has reformed. He decided he couldn't get the girl by being nasty, so he's trying to be big-hearted. But as far as I'm concerned, he still stinks."

"Poldi and I," explained Aaron, "we're having a little chat, mostly about Sis."

"I heard," remarked Carl. "That's why I came down."

Aaron's face fell. "You heard what she said?"

Carl nodded. Poldi said, "Don't feel so badly about it, Aaron. You ought to hear me when I really get going."

"I'd prefer not to."

Poldi's smile was so artificial that she almost simpered. "When I get mad," she said, "I usually break up the furniture, and I didn't do that with you." She gave him a grim, regretful look. "At least, not yet."

Carl said, "Forget it. Sit down, Aaron. If all you said is straight, you have a few things to tell me."

"Gladly," said Aaron. "Just as soon as we're alone."

Poldi rose ponderously. With her lips clapped tightly together and her arms swinging imaginary brick-bats, she stamped across the room and trudged up the stairs. Carl heard her steps on the floor above. They crossed the studio and stopped at the far side, just above the iron pipe that connected the two rooms.

"Well?" asked Carl.

"I suppose you want to know about my trip down here a week ago, and why I kept you from Pritchard. Well, you'll have to do some guessing. Here's all I know. Before Milly left New York, she'd hinted something about marriage. AJ sent me for just one reason. To prevent it."

"He must have known Jeremy was still alive, and so he didn't want Milly to commit bigamy. But that doesn't explain his interest after the murder."

"I thought you might know, Carl. My only instructions, when AJ went north, were to keep you away from Pritchard. Crowder had the same orders, too. That was why he didn't look too hard. But matters got out of control when somebody was killed on Pritchard's doorstep. He couldn't be overlooked any more, and I had to be pretty

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high-handed. Outside of that, I've played fair with you right along. You heard before how I stand with AJ."

"Yes. Why is he so afraid of Pritchard?"

"I don't know, Carl. I haven't even a suspicion. Have you?"

"No. But I think it's time to go see AJ and ask."

Aaron smiled. "Don't go there on a bluff. He's a better poker player than you are."

"That's something you can only be sure about after the hands are in."

Aaron sighed as if he'd just been ordered to smack a stick of dynamite with a hammer and, against his better judgment, had decided to obey. "Come on," he said. "Let's get it over with."

According to arrangements, Carl stayed in the parked taxi in front of the hotel for precisely three minutes. Then he stepped out and walked briskly through the lobby. As he passed the bar, he saw Aaron standing with one foot on the rail and sipping his inevitable scotch. The man to whom Aaron was talking and whose back was turned to the entrance was Detective White. Carl took the elevator to the fourth floor and waited.

Aaron appeared about ten minutes later. "Clever guy, White," he remarked. "He's watching the hotel in case you try to see Gabrielle or Sis. I had to tell him that when he drank at the bar, he ought to face the lobby. That was after you'd passed, of course. I had to argue with him. He said you wouldn't show up in the daytime. You weren't the type."

"Then Masterson isn't fooling about getting me," said Carl. "It's sort of hard to believe."

"Well, you didn't think I shot at you just for fun, did you?"

"How do I know? You probably enjoyed it, at that."

"Not much. It was too risky."

"For you or for me?"

Aaron didn't answer. He led the way down the corridor and rapped at a door. He had to knock a second time before Masterson opened it.

Masterson's green eyes blinked; then his voice snapped out crisply. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"We're having a conference," said Carl. "I understand you like them."

"I have nothing to say to either of you. Bettner, you'll regret this."

Carl moved forward and Aaron closed the door. Masterson retreated. "Sit down, gentlemen," he said.

Carl remained standing. "We want you to call off the police hunt and to go back north. My agreement with you was to solve a murder, regardless of who turned out to be guilty. You know you've broken your word, don't you?"

"I happen to think that you killed my sister."

"Even Crowder would laugh at that one," said Carl.

Masterson's hard, compelling eyes focused on Carl. "Just why do you expect to be taken seriously?"

"Because I know who killed Milly. And because I can point out Jeremy Keyser any time I want to. Change your mind now?"

"I might, if I didn't have fifty million dollars to fight you with. Fifty million gives me a very comfortable feeling."

"It may work here, but it won't buy the Federal government. And the moment you move against me, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is going to arrest you for the kidnaping of Dr. Walter Pritchard."

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"You know where he is, of course?"

"Naturally."

"And that he'll testify against me?"

"Certainly. He'll identify Clyde Ritter, of your local office, who was acting under your personal orders."

"A threat like that," said Masterson, "is worth thinking about. Naturally, I couldn't buck the government. I'd have to compromise. On the other hand —" he took a half dollar from his pocket, twiddled the coin and tossed it. He glanced sharply at Carl. "Would you allow me to make a phone call?"

"No."

"Then suppose you do it yourself. Call room four-fifty-eight — and — uh — then use your own judgment."

Carl didn't get it. He picked up the phone and said in his best disguised voice, "Four-fifty-eight, please."

The girl said "Mr. Man! It's you again! How your voice does change!"

Carl grimaced. A moment later another familiar voice spoke over the phone. "Dr. Walter Pritchard speaking. Who's this?"

Carl bit his lips. This time, he didn't have to disguise his tone; it disguised itself. "Just step into four-ten, please," he said.

Masterson smiled. "You don't believe in voices, do you? You'd like to see him."

"Seems like a good idea. Unless you expect to kill Pritchard — which I doubt — you still have to back down for fear he'll talk."

Masterson shrugged. "People like Pritchard don't bother me. Nor people like you." His lips tightened. "Nor Bettner, who's going to be the sorriest of the lot."

The knock on the door was mild and timid. Aaron opened it and Pritchard walked in sadly. "Oh," he said.

"Come right in," ordered Masterson. "I want to clear up a few things for the benefit of these friends of mine. The best way to convince them is to let them hear directly. Have you got anything against me, Pritchard?"

Pritchard lowered his eyes and shook his head dolefully. "No," he said. "Nothing."

"You weren't kidnaped, were you?"

"Oh. Of course not."

"How do we stand, Pritchard?"

"I'm very grateful to you," said the dentist in a dead voice. "You got me out of a disagreeable situation and you're giving me an excellent job. Company dentist at one of your northern plants."

"At a good salary?"

"Very good."

Masterson looked at Carl and shrugged. Carl snapped out, "Pritchard, you know who Jeremy Keyser is, don't you?"

Pritchard kept looking at the floor. "Jeremy? He was killed. Ten years ago. In an auto accident."

Carl reddened. Masterson said crisply, "When I hired you, I made the remark that you were safe because I could smash you like a two-bit peddler. I exaggerated the amount, but otherwise I was correct. A college professor with a few theories about crime. Theories are very good, Wayward, as long as they stay on the campus. You can even write them up and publish them in scientific magazines that nobody reads. But the lesson you're now learning is that money runs this world. It buys votes and politicians and office holders and whole cities. It buys newspapers and radio time, but most important of all, it keeps people like you where you be-

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long. Just spend a few minutes in silent contemplation of what a million dollars means. I often do. Then multiply it by fifty. Perhaps, by that time, you'll be impressed.

"I'm not a vengeful man. I could have you thrown in jail and mauled by the police on a trumped up charge or on no charges at all, and there's not a thing in the world you could do. But I'm not going to. I'm simply ordering you out of town. Both of you. And never let me hear from you again. Wayward and Bettner — what a pair!"

The blood was pounding at Carl's temples and his jaw was clamped so tightly that it hurt. He was helpless and licked, and he knew it. He couldn't think of a gesture with which to salve his self-respect.

The crash sounded from the next room. For a moment, Carl didn't move. Then he glanced at the door.

Masterson took a quick step forward to block the door. But for that tell-tale defensive move, Carl might not have bothered. He strode forward, snapped, "Get out of my way!" and shoved at Masterson. Masterson grabbed Carl's arm, and Carl twisted loose and hammered at the door. It swung back and slammed against the wall.

Gabrielle looked up and uttered a quick gasp. She was picking up the pieces of the china vase that had fallen over. She was wearing a man's checked dressing gown.

She stood up slowly. Her brown eyes were nervous and frightened, and she lifted her arm as if in defense. As she did so, a flap of the gown fell away and showed her bare skin.

Carl wheeled and strode out. His face was working and he was incapable of speech. He marched dizzily down the hall, rang the elevator bell and fumbled stupidly for cigarettes. When he found one, his hand was trembling violently.

He would have gotten off at the main floor and marched straight into White's arms if Aaron hadn't been next to him. Aaron said, "Basement, please."

Carl glanced up and smiled wanly. Fifty million dollars. It was too much.

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21: THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T STAY DEAD

CARL SAT DOWN on the roof and glanced at his watch. He had about eight minutes in which to pull himself together and face it. Ever since he had opened the door and seen Gabrielle in the checked bathrobe, he had existed in a haze, as unreal and depressing as the damp night air that drifted across the roof and chilled him down to his joints.

It was Aaron who had taken charge, who had led him through the labyrinth of the basement and out through a delivery entrance. Aaron had taken him into a small bar, fed him a couple of drinks and dragged Carl's information from him. Carl had had no will. His tongue moved and the words came out, the facts he had saved and organized with such care and method. But they had come out in a jumble, all the damning details which piled up to the inevitable conclusion.

Carl supposed he had told everything he knew, but he had no clear recollection. Throughout, he had kept thinking Gabrielle — Gabrielle. Her name repeated, her image in his mind, and always, that leaden feeling at his heart. Gabrielle —

Aaron had outlined a course of action and Carl had nodded and scarcely understood. All he knew was that at nine o'clock sharp he was to climb down the skylight and accuse Jeremy Keyser. Crowder would be near by, listening and everything depended on Carl's performance. Somehow, Aaron had persuaded Crowder to give Carl this chance. Once Crowder was convinced, Carl would be safe. Later on, Masterson might order Carl's arrest for some other reason, but it was up to Carl to avoid that, too. Crowder was armed with warrants. For entry and search. And in addition, he had two murder warrants, one of which he would use tonight. "For murder, Carl Wayward." And that other one, "For murder, Jeremy Keyser, alias —"

Carl knew why Gabrielle had done it, of course. For his sake. To succeed by her feminine wiles where Carl's force and logic had failed. He supposed he should have been glad that her love stopped at nothing, but he wasn't. He was merely depressed and miserable because his failure had dragged her into it and she'd thought it was up to her to rescue him.

He looked at his watch again. Two minutes. He stood up and raised his hand. His long slim fingers looked bony and knotted, like ugly talons about to dig down into flesh and blood. Well, so be it. He was playing this his way. Even Aaron was less in Carl's confidence than he supposed. Stunned and miserable and unbelieving though Carl had been, his unconscious mind had still directed him with a sure, subtle touch.

Well, that was something. Like a veteran fighter out on his feet and throwing himself into the protection of a clinch. What was the phrase Carl had once used? Punch-drunk on theories. Well, punch-drunk or not, time was up. Lafayette, or Jeremy or whatever the guy wanted to call himself — we are here! Carl walked over to the

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skylight and lifted it.

It raised easily, on freshly oiled hinges, and Carl knew that he was right. The skylight method at the other end, where Milly had been killed. The skylight method at this end, too, where the murderer had started. That had been part of the logic of Carl's analysis. The rest of it came back to him now, with a flash of clarity. One more fact, one more effort —

Carl glanced down and saw the ladder in position. Aaron had done his job. But the top of the ladder seemed a long way off and Carl wondered whether his six feet of height plus the length of his arms would be enough to reach. But that was all right, too, and clinched his theory. He felt a hard, unyielding confidence as he lowered his body, hung by his arms and let his feet grope for the ladder.

He stayed there for a few seconds. Then he turned on his flashlight and carefully closed the skylight. He let the light move along the well into which the skylight opened. Then he saw it. A small hole between a couple of beams, and inside it the silvery reflection of metal. He stood on his toes to look more closely. He was no arms expert and he wasn't certain whether the gun was a thirty-eight, but it looked about the right size. And it was definitely a gun.

He didn't touch it for fear of spoiling fingerprints, but he gazed steadily and almost joyously for a moment. The murder weapon that had killed first Milly and then the little stumble-bum. The fates had switched sides. They were playing Carl Wayward's game tonight.

Quietly, he climbed down the ladder, adjusted his coat and then knocked at the door. He heard footsteps. Then the door opened and he was gazing at the queer collection of knick-knacks, at the carved little figurines, the exotic furniture and the brightly colored drapes.

Carl stepped into the room and said, "Evening, Jeremy."

Arthur Benning closed the door. "Jeremy?" he said.

Carl sat down. "You're Jeremy Keyser. Don't bother denying it, please. Sonny, Sis, Pritchard, Masterson — they all know you. And there must be dozens of witnesses up north who'd identify you."

Benning sat down. "I'm Jeremy Keyser," he said quietly. "What of it?"

"Murder," said Carl. "Just a couple of murders."

"Don't be ridiculous! Just because she was my wife —"

"Don't bother," said Carl. "I'm telling you, at the beginning, exactly where you stand. I'll give you the whole story, and you can supply any details that happen to be missing. And keep away from the desk. I know there's a gun in the drawer — I saw it that night with Linda. Remember? And I have a gun of my own this evening." He took Aaron's revolver out of his pocket. "So don't try anything."

"You're making a horrible mistake," said Benning-Keyser, in a low voice.

"I'll skip the ancient history. Pritchard told me all about the accident and the faked death and the insurance fraud and the blackmail. I'll start a few months ago, when you told Pritchard you wanted to see Milly and your children, and he wrote her that you were still alive and wanted to see her. And Sonny and Sis. That's why she took them out of school, of course. Just correct me any time I'm wrong."

"You're right so far."

"Thanks. She came down here and saw you. As far as I've figured it out, you

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didn't really expect to go back to her. You wanted to see your children and have them accept you as their father. That was the chief thing you had in mind. But you were involved with Linda, and her dancing was your real support. You were never good at making money. People came to see Linda's dancing, and you had a little income from Pritchard. But you couldn't have given up Linda even if you'd wanted to. She wouldn't have it. The trouble was that she wanted to marry you, and naturally you couldn't — without committing bigamy. So Milly came to New Orleans and saw you. What happened?"

"She came here," said Jeremy, speaking in a low, tense voice. "She refused to let me see Sonny and Sis, but she told me all about them. How well they got along, and how Sonny would be ready for college soon and how Sis wanted to sing. That's why I made Linda take steps about offering her a job here."

Carl nodded. "I know. That gave you away."

"But nothing was settled," continued Jeremy. "We arranged —" Then he stopped.

Carl smiled. "You arranged another meeting. In a courtyard. On Chartres Street."

"No — no — I swear it! I didn't mean to say anything of the sort. How she got there, why — I swear to you, I know nothing. I was going to see her Monday, here at the club. I know nothing about the courtyard."

"She died in my arms," said Carl. "She always loved you, and at the end she thought you were holding her in your lap. I guess she couldn't see very clearly. She was dying. But she'd expected to meet you there and so, when somebody came, she thought it was you. She murmured something that bothered me for a long while. But some time after I'd visited your place, I caught on. Your records, Jeremy."

"What records?"

"All modern hot-stuff, with one exception. *La Bohême.* That was Milly's favorite, wasn't it?"

Jeremy didn't answer.

"A sort of lover's secret between you. A pet name. She kept saying, there in the courtyard, 'Call — me — me — me.' I didn't dope it out for a long time. Mimi was the heroine of *La Bohême.* What Milly really said was, 'Call me Mimi.' Which proved she thought she was lying in your arms, and showed that her appointment was with you."

"This is ridiculous!" snapped Jeremy.

"The stumble-bum," said Carl, "was a bright idea. As I get it, you paid him simply to be in the courtyard at ten o'clock. He didn't know why he was there or what he was supposed to do, but he found out. He was supposed to run away. He didn't see who killed Milly or how it was done, but he knew somebody'd been killed and he ran. He was the decoy, the little red herring thrown across the trail. We all chased him, just as we were supposed to do, and thought he was the key to the whole case. Actually, he had nothing to do with it. If he'd been caught, he couldn't have told a damn thing.

"I think I know exactly what his story would have been. He'd have said an unknown person paid him a sum of money to go to an apartment in the building where Milly was killed. He was sent to the empty one, of course. If nobody answered, he was to go down to the courtyard and wait. That gave you the chance to rig up the gun device. A very clever idea, using the little bum as a decoy, but

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he boomeranged."

"How?"

"By being intelligent. You could tell me how he boomeranged, but I don't want you to strain yourself. He got hold of a list of suspects, and he realized he could accuse anybody who had no alibi. So he tried to squeeze out some easy money for himself. Poldi told me the truth about that.

"The second person he tried was Pritchard, but that time the blackmail didn't work. Pritchard was the weak link and there was no telling what he might spill. He held the key to the whole business. Pritchard stalled the stumble-bum and told him to come back later. He phoned you, and you went up there and killed the stumble-bum when he returned.

"But where you lost out was the matter of motive. The arrangement in the courtyard was supposed to wound Milly, and not kill her. That would give you a chance to see Sonny and Sis, with Milly temporarily out of the way. Also, it would give you time in which to get rid of Linda, if you so decided. The motive, the fact that murder was never intended — that was the one clue I could trust."

Carl stared at the wall. "The portrait business, which Linda took and pretended had been her doing. It wasn't, of course. Milly wanted to know what you'd look like. Knowing Ollie's talents, and yet not wanting to tell him the circumstances, Milly had sent him anonymously that old photograph of yours. It was the only one she had, whereas Linda would obviously have sent a much more recent one. But Linda was worried that the peculiar circumstances surrounding it would lead to you, so she thought up a plausible excuse and took the thing. Ollie was only too glad to get rid of it. And, though it formed no logical part of the case, it made me very curious about you. That, and the readiness with which you hired Sis, despite her inexperience."

"Isn't it usual," said Jeremy sarcastically, "to try at least to place the murderer at the scene of the crime?"

"That's easy. You climbed up to the roof, reached the street through another building, and repeated the process to reach the courtyard where Milly was shot."

"What time?" demanded Jeremy.

"Ten o'clock, sharp."

"At ten," said Jeremy, and for the first time he was smiling, "I was sitting in my own bathtub in my own bathroom, and I can prove it. Because the bartender rang my bell!"

"I know. That had me stumped for a while, until I saw —" Carl turned and pointed to the little bell-clapper over the door — "until I saw that. An ordinary gummed label. You pasted it across the clapper before you left. If the seal was broken, then you knew the bell had rung and you could mention it and give your bell alibi. It was a damn good idea, too. Except that once I saw through it, it was evidence against you instead of for you."

"But —" Jeremy rose and stared at the bell. "But — Wayward — you can't do this! I'm innocent! I swear to you — there's something behind this — somebody's trying to frame me! Oh, God! If I could only think!"

"Don't bother," said Carl. He leaned back casually, but the tightness with which he gripped the arm of his chair showed the tension under which he labored. "I can do the thinking. Of course there's somebody behind this. Masterson."

Jeremy spun around. "That hyena!"

"He can railroad you to the chair so

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fast you won't even have time to see the reporters. Or —" Carl studied the round, fleshy face, the puffed cheeks and the haggard eyes — "or he can drag it out, claim new evidence and end it with a short sentence, and a quick parole."

"He wouldn't dare railroad me!" exclaimed Jeremy. "What I know —"

"What?" asked Carl.

Jeremy rubbed his forehead. "You have all the answers. You're working for him. You framed me on his orders. But I'll break him so that he'll curse himself the rest of his days!"

"How?" asked Carl. "You better talk now, Jeremy. The police are on their way, and once you're in their hands —"

"You'll do anything for money," said Jeremy slowly. "Listen — I'll be cut off from the world. I know what the cops down here can do. Everybody knows that. You tell Masterson that unless he gets me out of this mess, I'll talk. I'll shout it out at the trial. I'll scream it to the whole country."

"What?"

Jeremy laughed. "He's a big shot. Manufacturing defense materials. Suppose it turned out he was a German citizen — then what?"

"So that's it!" said Carl. "Are you sure?"

"I ought to know, oughtn't I? My own wife. Milly and Albert — they came from German-American parents and they were both born in a German African colony, while their parents were on a business trip, and they were never registered as American citizens. Their parents never bothered, and neither did they. Legally, they're both German. How would that look for Masterson, with all his government contracts and connections?"

"Thanks," said Carl, "I'll do what I can." He scribbled rapidly on a sheet of paper, folded it and then stood up.

He felt like a skunk as he called out, "All right, Crowder — come on!"

The balcony doors flung open, and Crowder and White and Aaron entered. Crowder had his handcuffs out and he strode forward aggressively.

Jeremy muttered at Carl, "You lousy rat!" Then he slumped down in a chair and began sobbing.

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22: OF DEATH AND TAXES

FOR THE LAST TIME, Carl and Aaron marched down a hotel corridor to knock on Masterson's door. Carl felt sure of himself, confident that he could tie up all the loose ends except his own. From the beginning, he'd been thinking of the case from Sis's point of view, and now he would see Masterson and then give Aaron the information that would finally free Sis and point her to the future instead of the past. To Aaron who had chosen the way of independence and of love, and to Sis who had struggled within herself and who had grown up within the space of a week — to those two, Carl could give the means to start a new and better life. But for himself, he had only the knowledge that Gabrielle had been forced into an action that surely made her soul revolt. But Carl bore her guilt, and it made him feel old and bitter.

Aaron knocked sharply on the door, and Poldi opened it. "Masterson's inside," she said. "Waiting."

"Have any trouble?" asked Carl.

"He wanted to go out and so I had to sit on him a while, but he finally saw sense and we almost got friendly. If you'd been a half hour later, I'd have gotten a yacht trip out of him. It doesn't matter, though. I get seasick. Will you be over later on this evening?"

"Not me," replied Carl. "Maybe Aaron will."

Poldi glared at Aaron. "Sis is waiting. I don't know what for or what she sees in you, but she's at my place, waiting. Women are such fools."

"Just ask her what she sees in me," observed Aaron.

"I thought of some words I forgot to use on you this afternoon," said Poldi. "I'm saving them up in case you ever make Sis unhappy. And I'll say them with furniture, too." But the threat was good-natured.

Masterson stood up as Carl and Aaron entered the room. "That female," he snapped. "What is she?"

"A sort of Mother Earth," replied Carl.

"She kept me here until you two arrived. What do you want now?"

"Jeremy Keyser, alias Arthur Benning, has been arrested for murder," said Carl. "We just came from there."

"You blundering fool!" snorted Masterson. "If you'd only come to me!"

"What could you have done?"

"I might have pointed out that you'd be better off dropping the whole business." He turned in annoyance and paced toward the window. "Did he confess?"

"No," said Carl. "No confession. But the evidence is pretty strong. I'll let Aaron tell it, if you want."

Aaron sat down and began the long account of Jeremy Keyser's career. Carl stayed near the phone. Masterson listened attentively and injected an occasional, "Yes, yes. I know that."

When Aaron had finished, Masterson sucked in his lips in that characteristic gesture of annoyance. "You've done it now. Jeremy's booked, charged, and there's no way in the world of stopping it. I know Jeremy. He's stupid, but he's obstinate. I'd have to buy him

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off, and the pair of you, and maybe Crowder. You realize what you've done, don't you? This citizenship mess is merely a technicality. If my name had been registered at a consulate fifty years ago, there'd have been no trouble. Now, all the things that will be upset, all the delays because of a piece of stupidity, an empty technicality — you see what your asinine bungling has done, don't you?"

"Sure," said Carl. "But I don't see it your way. It seems to me that if you'd behaved decently, instead of trying to threaten everybody with a bludgeon, you wouldn't be in any trouble at all. It would be a matter of a technicality which I'd dispose of gratis."

"What are you driving at?"

"Suppose I could get Jeremy out of this. Bring him here a free man and let you settle it with him. You could trust Aaron and myself to shut up, and you probably have enough on Crowder to handle him, too."

"How can you get him out of this?"

"You write out a check. If I don't perform by tomorrow morning, you cancel payment. If I do, I keep the check."

"Blackmail!" snapped Materson.

"My fee for investigating. You paid me a retainer — remember? You owe me five thousand, but we'll make it a little more."

Masterson paced the room again. Carl said, quietly, "Another ten thousand clear. Plus income tax?"

"It's robbery!" barked Masterson.

"And Aaron's job back."

"I don't want the damn job," said Aaron quietly. "I want Sis."

Masterson flipped the coin once more and then rammed it into his pocket. He wheeled, strode to the desk and sat down. He wrote out the check and handed it to Carl. "Well?"

"Jeremy isn't under arrest," declared Carl. "I slipped Crowder a note and told him to release Jeremy as soon as they got outside. Who ever heard of a man shooting his wife in order to get her back? Or to win the love of his children?"

Masterson licked his lips. His voice crackled gutterally. "But if not Jeremy, then — who?"

"The acrobat, of course. The jealous dame, Linda Trevis. She had the real motive. Shoot Milly and make her think Jeremy had done it. She'd never take Jeremy back, then. Or, if Milly was killed, what did Linda care? Then Jeremy would be free to marry her. She almost made it, at that. She sat in a bar last night and calmly told me that she'd finally hooked Benning, and I sipped a glass of beer and listened to her hand me the whole case. Motive and effect, purpose and accomplishment. She shot Milly and blamed it on Jeremy, killed the only witness and tried to scare Sonny and Sis out of town.

"She must have been listening from the balcony when Jeremy and Milly had their first interview. Linda heard them make a future appointment, so the next day she called up and changed it. Told Milly to meet Jeremy in the courtyard on Sunday night, at ten sharp. Linda sneaked through Jeremy's room while he was in his bath."

"How about the stumble-bum?" asked Aaron. "How did he happen to get killed?"

Masterson grimaced. "Pritchard told me about that. He called Jeremy to ask what he should do. Linda must have answered the phone, though Pritchard didn't recognize her voice."

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"Disguised," said Carl. "She was an actress, remember. Used to do impersonations. She disguised her voice when she called here on Monday and tried to scare Sonny and Sis out of town."

He picked up the phone and called Crowder. He listened quietly for about five minutes and then nodded. "She confessed," he said, replacing the phone. "They found the gun with her fingerprints, hidden near the skylight, and when the prints matched up, she confessed. She dressed as a man for both jobs. She could, you know. A flat-chested hybrid —"

Gabrielle's phrase came automatically to his lips. He stood up. "About Kelly's murder. Pritchard called to ask what to do, and Linda told him to stall off. She dressed up as a man and used the skylight route so that nobody'd see her. She took a cab to Pritchard's, and shot the little stumble-bum. He wasn't dangerous until he got in touch with Pritchard. But Pritchard meant bringing in Jeremy, and she was in love with Jeremy."

Carl looked at his check. Twelve thousand, including tax.

Carl stalked out of the room, down the corridor and past the elevators. He walked up the stairs, thinking of Gabrielle.

He entered the room without knocking. Gabrielle had been staring out of the window. Her lips were pale.

When she saw him, she jumped up, her whole face alight. "Carl!" she cried. She took two steps toward him and then stopped.

"Carl!" she cried. "I had to!"

"Had to what?" he asked stiffly.

"I went down there to make him change his orders to the police, and while we were talking, you and Aaron knocked on the door. I didn't want to be seen, so I told him I'd wait in the bedroom. I heard everything, and I just couldn't bear it when you backed down. I had to do something to make you desperate, so that you'd fight him. But there was only one way to make you mad. I undressed and put on his robe and knocked over the vase. The only thing I was scared of was that you wouldn't believe it."

"I saw you in Masterson's bedroom. What else?"

She smiled and came close to him. He put his arms around her.

"You're not such a good detective," she said, "because you overlooked the clue."

"What clue?"

"The robe I was wearing. Masterson's checked one. If I ever let another man make love to me, which I won't, I certainly wouldn't wear a checked bathrobe that didn't fit. I'd have sense enough to wear something attractive."

"That's where you're wrong," said Carl. "I thought you looked beautiful."

THE END

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D AS IN DEAD

Carl Wayward followed the lovely lady down the dark New Orleans street, watched her turn into the dimly lit doorway, then heard the gunshot and saw her stagger and fall. He saw the glint of the .38 revolver, apparently flung aside. He saw the little wild-eyed man with the bushy beard, hunched up as though in terror beyond where the lovely lady lay moaning. Carl lifted her in his arms, and she murmured, "Call me . . . me . . . me . . . ," then she collapsed in death. The significance of these words escaped him for the moment. But the impact of the policeman's hand on his shoulder was not misunderstood. Nor did he fail to realize the ominous import of the flat warning from elsewhere: ". . . you might get killed." He saw with fierce clarity that Carl Wayward, psychology professor, would have to turn Carl Wayward, crack detective, if he wanted to escape the double-barrelled dangers of torture and death.

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